

**Theological Meaning and Practice of Suffering
In the Spirituality of Saint Therese of Lisieux (1873-1897)**

LEE Shui Man Murine

Supervisor: Dr. Milton W. Y. Wan

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Divinity

Graduate Division of Theology

© The Chinese University of Hong Kong

June 2009

The Chinese University of Hong Kong holds the copyright of this thesis. Any person(s) intending to use a part or whole of the materials in the thesis in a proposed publication must seek copyright release from the Dean of the Graduate school.



Abstract of Thesis entitled:

Theological Meaning and Practice of Suffering in the Spirituality of Saint Therese of Lisieux (1873-1897)

Submitted by: LEE Shui Man Murine
For the Degree of Master of Divinity,
Graduate School of Theology,
at The Chinese University of Hong Kong in June 2009

In Therese's spirituality, the theological meaning of suffering is grounded in its unity with love. Suffering is an integral part of love, as God's grace and privilege of love. They are inseparable because suffering is also an expression of the divine love of Jesus Christ to love and save all souls. This is vividly manifested in the sorrowful Holy Face and the humiliation of the Suffering Servant. Hence, in light of its unity with love, suffering itself is not to be viewed merely in a functional way as a means to achieve sanctity or apostolic goals for conversion or charity. It represents the whole process and end for human to experience the loving presence of God. To Therese, the merciful love of God embraces all other divine attributes including justice. So suffering is neither fearful nor heroic for its own sake.

In her Little Way of Spiritual Childhood based in the mutuality of love of the Father and the child, Therese learnt that it was God who granted her the desires He wanted in her and she boldly accepted 'all' that God gives her including suffering. Offering her whole self as the victim of the merciful love of God, suffering embraces her apostolic zeal to participate in Jesus' redemptive works to save souls. Therese integrated suffering, including both

daily small acts of sacrifices and her darkest days of physical and spiritual trials, with her simple and childlike desires to love Christ and make him loved on earth and in heaven.

Therese's suffering experience, however, cannot be over romanticized or idealized. In the vulnerability and weakness of human souls, she had suffered not without pains, frustrations and temptations. Notably, Therese did not emphasize her mystical experiences or claim to suffer in a heroic manner. What she focused was her vocation of love and daily ordinary acts of humility, obedience and charity. In Therese's spirituality, paradoxically, to arrive at "great" sanctity requires a "great" desire but to realize this "greatness", one must move from being a "great" to "little" soul, like a grain of sand seen only by Christ. Similarly, for suffering, Therese willed to die of love as a feeble victim without any glorifying martyrdom, mystical graces and extraordinary penances.

Therese's understanding and practice of suffering are accessible and applicable to ordinary lay Christians today. The key value of studying Therese's spiritual teaching of suffering is the returning to the fundamental biblical truth of the love of God. From there, we find the meaning of suffering and driving force to lead a God-centered life. Therese showed us a model of reflection and action under which every ordinary Christian may seek the truth of suffering in its relation of love in, through and for Christ, in their daily lives.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	vi
ABBREVIATIONS	vii
INTRODUCTION	vii
i	
I. What does suffering mean?	viii
II. Saint Therese of Lisieux: Her Spirituality and Suffering	ix
III. Thesis Statement	xii
IV. Methodology	xii
V. Contents	xiv
CHAPTER 1 : Core Essence of Therese’s Spirituality: The Little Way of Spiritual Childhood	1
I. Spiritual Formation	2
II. Essence of the Little Way of Spiritual Childhood	7
III. Practice of the Little Way	18
IV. Assessment of the Little Way	22
V. The Little Way: A Life Journey to Seek and Experience the Loving Presence of God	26
CHAPTER 2 : Experience of Suffering	29
I. Major Experiences of Suffering	30
1. Before Entering Carmel (1873 – 1888)	30
2. After Entering Carmel (1888 – 1897)	35
II. Essential Elements of Therese’s Response to Suffering	44
III. Suffering in Her Little Way	48
CHAPTER 3 : Theological Meaning of Suffering and Its Relationship to the Little Way	49
I. Theological Meaning of Suffering	50
II. Relationship between Suffering and the Little Way	63
III. Suffering : A Loving Presence of God	66
CHAPTER 4 : Key Contributions and Limitations	69
I. Key Contributions	70

II.	Limitations and Challenges	81
III.	Suffering : Further Areas to Address	86
CONCLUSIONS		88
I.	Theological Meaning and Practice of Suffering: An Interpretation.....	88
II.	Limitations of This Study	92
III.	Suffering : A Mystery to be Explored and Lived Out.....	93
BIBLIOGRAPHY		95

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Milton Wan, who has given me the guidance, inspiration and support in this research. I would also like to thank Dr. Francis Yip who has guided us on the thesis writing skills and given us encouragement throughout the year.

ABBREVIATIONS

- GC I *Letters of St. Therese of Lisieux, General Correspondence Volume I 1877-1890*. Centenary Edition. Translated by John Clarke. Washington:ICS Publications, 1982.
- GC II *Letters of St. Therese of Lisieux, General Correspondence Volume II 1890-1897*. Centenary Edition. Translated by John Clarke. Washington:ICS Publications, 1988.
- LC *Her Last Conversations*. Translated by John Clarke. Washington:ICS Publications, 1977.
- SS *Story of A Soul : The Autobiography of Saint Therese of Lisieux*. 3rd Edition. Translated by John Clarke. Washington:ICS Publications, 1996.

INTRODUCTION

I. WHAT DOES SUFFERING MEAN?

In human history, questions on the meaning of suffering have never ceased and there could hardly be a complete and universally-accepted answer. To Christians, many are still struggling with the theological issues on suffering which would significantly shape their perceived divine attributes and relationship between God and the world. Is suffering a result of the wrath of God on human sins? Is suffering a training exercise or trial that God gives to human to strengthen their faith and will to help others? Is suffering a way of divine revelation of God's power and salvation? Is suffering a necessary means for spiritual purification or mortification for the salvation of souls and reparation of sins? Is suffering a trick of the devils to shaken human's faith and entice them into unfaithful thoughts? Is suffering just a natural phenomenon of life with no specific universal significance at all? Or does God simply stay aloof, purposely limit His power or even lack the power to interfere in human suffering? To many Christians today, the acceptance of suffering may still represent only a passive and helpless way of human's response to the will of God without any choice or rational explanation.

All the above approaches of interpretations are commonly adopted in our everyday life and they need not be mutually exclusive. The application of these interpretations would always depend on the relevant contexts, stage of

spiritual maturity and spiritual traditions. Among these approaches, I would like to explore if suffering can only be viewed in a functional way as a means to achieving human sanctity or redemptive goals. Does suffering itself bear any existential meaning in light of human relationship with God? The research would be based on the spirituality and experience of suffering of St. Therese of Lisieux, a French Catholic Carmelite nun, living in the late 19th Century.

II. SAINT THERESE OF LISIEUX : HER SPIRITUALITY AND SUFFERING

St. Therese of Lisieux (1873-1897) was one of the most important saints in modern Catholic spirituality. Her short life of 24 years with 9 years spent in a small Carmelite convent in Lisieux, France, has fascinated and inspired numerous people all over the world. Just 28 years after her death, Therese was canonized on May 17, 1925 and she was designated the patroness of the Church's missionary activity along with St. Francis Xavier. Over the next few decades, interests in her works by scholars and believers have not slowed down and Therese was appointed as the Doctor of the Church on October 19, 1997. Therese is well-known for her "Little Way of Spiritual Childhood" with the unwavering love and trust to Jesus Christ. Her "Little Way" can be understood both in a theological and literal way, as Therese often literally practiced her spirituality with the mind and heart of a little child. It is a spontaneous way of trusting, obeying, depending and loving her Heavenly Father. It is a child's simple belief in the unfailing love of her Father whom

her whole life is centered on.

Since her childhood, Therese's suffering experience already started with the early loss of her mother, separation with her elder sisters and later the death of her beloved father. In her last 18 months, Therese experienced an unspeakable darkness of spiritual trials accompanied by immense physical suffering from tuberculosis. With her "Little Way" founded on the mutuality of love between the Father and the child, Therese willed to the last throughout immense spiritual and physical suffering. However, one may easily question its theological breadth and objectivity as her little way was centered only on her personal experience. But when we have gained a deeper understanding of her inner encounter with God, we shall find that her little way and suffering are far beyond a private devotion. As we shall see, they also embrace a universal vocation of love towards all souls, especially sinners and non-believers, and unity in the communion of saints.

Like her simple and short life, Therese's suffering experience is nothing extraordinary or mystical as compared with some great saints. Her similar experiences can be found in any ordinary Christian's life. However, it is exactly the ordinary nature of her experiences that draws our attention to study as it may bring useful insights into the understanding of suffering in both a theological and practical way that becomes accessible and applicable to many ordinary Christians. Like every ordinary person, Therese had gone through a path from a self-centered childhood to maturity. The maturity process has drawn her to a profound understanding of sanctity, martyrdom, acts of good works and the law of love versus justice. In her childlike spirit,

Therese had sought and lived out the fundamental biblical faith of love to Jesus and other souls. Hence, in studying Therese's spirituality and suffering, it is necessary to trace from her seemingly ordinary and trivial life events at home and convent where we shall find great depth of her childlike but extraordinary desires to love God.

In Pope John Paul II's homily declaring Therese the Doctor of the Universal Church on October 19, 1997, he stressed on Therese's vocation of love that expresses the profound insights of faith. Pope John Paul II wrote,

"Therese of Lisieux did not only grasp and describe the profound truth of Love as the center and heart of the Church, but in her short life she lived it intensely. It is precisely this *convergence of doctrine and concrete experience*, of truth and life, of teaching and practice, which shines with particular brightness in this saint, and which makes her an attractive model especially for young people and for those who are seeking true meaning for their life".¹

Love, as the centre of her life, becomes the core foundation of how Therese interpreted suffering and responded to suffering in her own life. The key value of studying Therese in the subject of suffering is her writing only what she herself believed, tested and lived out throughout her whole life.

1 Pope John Paul II, "Pope Paul II Declares – St. Therese, Doctor of the Church" in *St. Therese: Doctor of the Little Way*, ed. Francis Mary (New Bedford, MA:Franciscan Friars of the Immaculate, 1997), 70.

III. THESIS STATEMENT

As shown in Therese's spirituality and practices of suffering, I would like to illustrate that suffering is not just a means in attaining sanctity or fulfilling redemptive goals but the whole process and end in experiencing the loving presence of God as willed by God.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This research would be largely based on primary sources, i.e. Therese's own writings. Therese did not write about her spiritual teachings, including the subjects on suffering, in a systematic or doctrinal way nor were her writings originally intended for widespread circulation. Her spiritual teaching is discerned primarily through her own life. Therese simply lived out, tested and affirmed the truth of her little way, i.e. the essence of the loving relationship with God, through her own daily experience with God, her family, convent sisters and spiritual confessors, as inspired by the Scriptures. Hence, to trace the understanding of suffering in Therese's spirituality, we need to study her own writings and trace her psychological, social and spiritual life journey.

The primary sources used in this research mainly include Therese's autobiography, "S tory of A Soul" (SS), which comprises of three original manuscripts (A to C) she wrote respectively in 1895, 1896 and 1897

addressing to her two blood sisters, Mother Agnes of Jesus and Sister Marie of the Sacred Heart, and her Prioress, Mother Marie De Gonzague, upon their respective requests.² Other important sources include a two-volume collection of General Correspondences (GC) written by among Therese and her convent sisters, family and spiritual brothers, etc. between the year 1877 and 1897, and Her Last Conversations (LC) which recorded the conversations among Therese and her convent sisters, family and doctors, etc. during the last few months before her death since April to September 1897 in the Carmel infirmary. Other primary sources used are her prayers and poetries. Apart from these primary sources, scholars' studies on Therese's spirituality and suffering will be examined. Analysis will also be made on how Therese's spirituality was affected by her Carmelite spiritual traditions, especially her spiritual father, St. John of the Cross, and how Therese's understanding of suffering offered some enriched or new perspectives to her contemporary spiritual traditions.

The method of study is to first trace Therese's critical spiritual development since her childhood and analyze her experiences of suffering at different life stages from psychosocial, physical and spiritual perspectives. Along with these analyses, I shall draw in various scholars' opinions and identify the key elements of her interpretations and responses to suffering. Based on these

² The first printing of Therese's autobiography, *Histoire d'une Ame*, was made in 1898 with the edited work of her sister, Mother Agnes. It appeared as a composite whole addressed to Mother Prioress Gonzague. Later in the 1914 editions subsequent to the Diocesan Process held in 1910, it began to indicate the individual direction of each of the three manuscripts to Therese's three sisters. In 1947, extensive scholarly works were performed to uncover Therese's original and unedited manuscripts and the three original manuscripts as used today were published in 1957. The 'Story of A Soul' used in this paper is based on the original manuscripts of Therese. Manuscript A was addressed to Mother Agnes as a memoir of her childhood. Manuscript B was addressed to Sister Marie upon Marie's request her putting in writing her little doctrine. Manuscript C was addressed to Mother Gonzague which mainly covered her religious life and acts of charity. See Introduction by John Clarke, SS xiv-xxii.

elements, I would make the assertions on the theological meaning and practices of suffering in Therese's spirituality.

V. CONTENTS

In Chapter 1, I shall highlight the core essence of Therese's spirituality, the Little Way of Spiritual Childhood. In this Chapter, I shall trace the key life events of Therese that have shaped her spiritual formation and which bear significant impact of her understanding and experience of suffering in regard to her relationship with God. I shall seek to illustrate the distinctiveness of her Little Way as not one of the ways to sanctity but the way of love centered on the love for, through and in Jesus Christ.

In Chapter 2, I shall summarize the major suffering experiences of Therese and analyze these experiences from psychosocial, physical and spiritual perspectives. Then, I shall discuss the various responses Therese made in face of these sufferings. Through these responses, her spiritual maturity in the way of self-abandonment, loving obedience, absolute trust and humility can be discerned. We can also, of course, see her going through many real pains, conflicts and trials under our fragile humanity and weaknesses.

In Chapter 3, from her suffering experiences, I shall examine the theological meaning of suffering in Therese's spirituality. Among three major approaches of interpreting suffering adopted by scholars, I shall attempt to seek the core or underlying meaning of suffering, in its relation to love and will of God. Then I shall explore the unique relationship between suffering and

Therese's Little Way of Spiritual Childhood. I shall seek to identify that the Little Way is not just a way to enable her to fight through suffering and bear till the end. Rather, suffering becomes one of the indispensable characteristics of the Little Way.

In Chapter 4, I shall discuss the key contributions of Therese's interpretation and practice of suffering to Christians in modern contexts. Under fragile and sinful humanity, there is no perfect way or full explanation for sanctity. I shall address the limitations and challenges that may be found in Therese's spiritual teaching of suffering and identify areas that would be complementary to her teaching.

Finally, I shall conclude that while suffering embraces the zeal for spiritual purification and apostolic mission for conversion of souls and acts of charity, suffering should not be viewed in a functional way as just a means but the integral part of love that we experience in, through and for God.

Through this study, I hope to draw our focus back to the fundamental teaching of the Scriptures, the love of God. As Therese demonstrated, everything is grace and the mystery of suffering is understood in light of love. Then, suffering, despite how intolerable, irrational or unjust in the eyes of human, becomes a grace and a privilege of love within which we can still will to the last and trust that God is always with us.

CHAPTER ONE

Core Essence of Therese's Spirituality: The Little Way of Spiritual Childhood

St. Therese of Lisieux was appointed as the Doctor of the Church on October 19, 1997.¹ Within the last few decades, the sanctity which Therese demonstrated through the Little Way of Spiritual Childhood has been regarded as a model for all Christians to follow.² Therese only lived a short life of 24 years and spent 9 years in a small cloistered convent in Carmel before her death. Transiting straight from an intimate and protected family to the convent life at the age of 15, Therese's theological education and religious life experience is really limited. As a cloistered nun in the late 19th Century France, her exposure to social and political reality is limited too. How do her seemingly childlike desires and acts be valued as the "secrets of sanctity" and "universal truth"? How is this Little Way of a monastic nun applicable for Christians of today? What makes her Little Way stand out among other spiritual doctrines and practices of great theologians and saints before and during her time? Before we study her interpretation and experience of

¹ This young Carmelite nun became the 33rd Doctors of the Church, who include great theologians like Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and St. John of the Cross. Among these 33 Doctors, Therese was the third women, joining the company of Terese of Avila of Spain and Catherine of Siena of Italy. See Guy Gaucher, "Preface" in *St. Therese: Doctor of the Little Way*, ed. Francis Mary (New Bedford, MA:Franciscan Friars of the Immaculate, 1997), IX.

² In Pope Benedict XV's address on Therese's practice of virtue on August 14, 1921, he stated, "In spiritual childhood is the secret of sanctity for all the faithful of the Catholic world.... There is a call to all the faithful of every nation, no matter what their age, sex, or state of life, to enter wholeheartedly into the Little Way which led Sister Therese to the summit of heroic virtue". On April 29, 1923, Pope Pius XI stated, "We earnestly desire that all the faithful should study her (Therese) in order to copy her, becoming children themselves; since otherwise they cannot, according to the words of the Master, arrive at the kingdom of heaven". See SS xii. On June 2, 1980, Pope John Paul II commented on Therese's contribution to the Church, "In this way there is something unique; the genius of St. Therese of Lisieux. At the same time there is the confirmation and renewal of the most fundamental and most universal truth. What truth of the Gospel message is, in fact, more fundamental and more universal than this one: God is Our Father and we are his children?". See Frederick Miller, *The Trial of Faith of St. Therese of Lisieux* (New York:Alba House, 1998), xiii.

suffering, we need to grasp a good understanding of the essence of her spirituality.

In this Chapter, I shall analyze the core essence of Therese's Little Way of Spiritual Childhood. Grounded on the merciful love of God, the Little Way represents not simply "one of the ways" towards sanctity. In light of its centrality of love, it can be regarded as "the" way. Therese did not write her spiritual teachings in a formal and systematic way. Her "Act of Oblation to the Merciful Love" made on June 9, 1895 is regarded as the most significant theological articulation of her spirituality. What we come to learn about her spiritual teaching is primarily through her own life.

I shall first trace the key events and turning points of her life to understand how her spiritual development was nurtured. Then, I shall attempt to enter Therese's spiritual world through the natural lens of a child. Based on the particular childlike characteristics, I would examine the foundations of the Little Way of Spiritual Childhood based on which we would explore how Therese viewed God and realized her vocation. Then, I shall review how she practiced the Little Way in her daily life. At the end of the Chapter, I would discuss the assessment of her Little Way as the way of love towards sanctity.

I. SPIRITUAL FORMATION

1. Nurtured in a family of intimacy and piety.

To understand Therese's Little Way, we need to grasp the impact of her relationship with her family, as Therese understood divine love through human love, especially from her father, Louis Martin. Therese was born as the smallest child in a pious Catholic middle-class family. She was much loved by her parents and four elder sisters. Under the influence of Louis, every member of the family was deeply committed to the Catholic faith and Therese received solid spiritual education from her family that paved the way for her religious life. Therese's mother died when she was four years old and Therese adored her father with enormous love and trust.³ Essentially, Therese's love of God was experienced through her love with her father. In her father, Therese saw a direct reflection of God Father and hence, obedience and love became a naturally indivisible unity throughout her life.⁴ As we shall discuss in Chapter Two, the later humiliated suffering of her father's mental illness has a profound impact on Therese's understanding of suffering.

2. *A child who is highly sensitive and sentimental.*

Therese acknowledged that she was excessively sensitive, very self-conscious and tearful. At school, she was rather silent, unsociable and always kept things to herself. Due to her health, she left the Abbey school at the age of 13 and received private tuition at home. Her consolation and joy

³ Louis Martin always called his youngest child "Little Queen" and Therese in turn adored her father as the "King". Therese recalled when she announced her decision to enter Carmel, "Papa seemed to be rejoicing with that joy that comes from a sacrifice already made. He spoke just like a saint and I'd love to recall his words and write them down, but all I preserved of them is a memory too sacred to be expressed." See SS 108. At this time, it was already his fourth daughter leaving him to become a nun.

⁴ Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit : Therese of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity*, Trans. Donald Nicholas and Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 120.

was only derived from her family. Her piety to Jesus was somehow developed along with this sentimental character and limitation in social relationship.⁵ We can see that Therese was always cautious about the danger of self-love and spiritual pride. While Therese always wore a smile in the convent, some other nuns' comments reflected a rather "hidden" and "unnoticeable" impression on this young Therese.

3. *Divine Call to Religious Life.*

In her childhood, Therese had already shown a special fervor to religious faith. At the age of 2, she already thought, "I too will be a religious".⁶ Of course, this was much attributed to her adoration of her elder sister, Pauline (Mother Agnes of Jesus, her later Prioress,) who was then planning to enter Carmel. After Pauline left her to join Carmel, Therese, at the age of 9, intensely felt the divine call as she wrote,

"I felt that Carmel was the *desert* where God wanted me to go also to hide myself....it was not the dream of a child led astray but the *certitude* of a divine call; I wanted to go to Carmel not for Pauline's sake but for *Jesus alone*.....words could not express but which left a great peace in my soul".⁷

However, like an ordinary child, she still needed time to grow into spiritual and

⁵ Therese wrote, "...conversations with creatures, even pious conversations, fatigued my soul. I felt it was far more valuable to speak to God than to speak about Him, for there is so much self-love intermingled with spiritual conversations!" See SS 87.

⁶ SS 20.

⁷ SS 58.

personal maturity before she affirmed her true vocation.

4. Threshold to Maturity of Devotion

In her spiritual development, there are two significant events that have shaped Therese's matured devotion to the love of God and discovery of her vocation. The first one is her miraculous cure of her mysterious illness by the smile of the Blessed Virgin on May 13, 1883.⁸ This cure has illuminated her young soul as she wrote, "the little flower was going to be born again to life... the Ray did not act all at once, but sweetly and gently it raised the little flower and strengthened her in such a way that five years later she was expanding on the fertile mountain of Carmel".⁹ The illness has also made her aware of the special purpose on her vocation. Therese wrote, "I can't describe this strange sickness, but I'm now convinced it was the work of the devil. For a long time after my cure, however, I believed I had become ill on purpose and this was a *real martyrdom* for my soul".¹⁰

Another significant event is her "conversion" on the Christmas night of 1886. This was an important turning point of her spiritual and personal maturity.¹¹ This incident transformed Therese into maturity leaving behind the sensitivities of her tearful youth and the self-centered desires to be pampered.

⁸ This illness lasted a few months when Therese had constant headache, seizures and hallucinations. Her family and doctor were helpless to get her cured. One day, when Therese's elder sisters were praying with her at her bedside, Therese looked up to the stature of the Virgin Mary and the illness went off. She recalled, "All of a sudden the Blessed Virgin appeared beautiful to me, so beautiful that never had I seen anything so attractive.... At that instant, all my pain disappeared". See SS 65-66.

⁹ SS 66.

¹⁰ SS 62.

¹¹ It had been a family tradition for her father to put the Christmas presents in the magic shoes that Therese hanged on the chimney corner. On the Christmas night of 1886, Therese overheard her papa saying, "Well, fortunately, this will be the last year!". Therese immediately felt the profound changes in her. She wrote, "Therese was no longer the same; Jesus had changed her heart! Forcing back my tears, I descended the stairs rapidly". See SS 98.

Conrad de Meester indicates that with the Christmas conversion, Therese no longer suffers from her almost neurotic form of self-obsession and hyper-sensitivity.¹² At this moment, she also discovered the need to abandon herself to follow the wills of Christ and fulfill the apostolic mission of conversion of souls.¹³

5. *Entrance to Carmel*

Therese entered Carmel on April 9, 1888 at the age of 15. At that time, it was an exceptionally young age and Therese attained the admission with much pains and efforts. Her tremendous courage and determination was displayed in her appeal to the Bishop in France and even before Pope Leo XIII during her pilgrimage to Rome with her father and sister Celine.¹⁴ In her early years in Carmel, Therese remained rather introverted as seen in her writing about her Novice Mistress. She wrote, "It was only with great effort that I was able to take direction, for I had never become accustomed to speaking about my soul and I did not know how to express what was going on within it", and she only looked up to Jesus as her 'director' who "taught her that science hidden from the wise and prudent and revealed to *little ones*."¹⁵

¹² Conrad De Meester, *With Empty Hands: The Message of St. Therese of Lisieux*, trans. Mary Semour (Washington:ICS, 2002), 3.

¹³ Referring to Luke 5:5, Therese wrote, "I could say to Him like His apostles: 'Master, I fished all night and caught nothing'. More merciful to me than He was to His disciples, Jesus *took the net Himself*, cast it, and drew it in filled with fish. He made me a fisher of *souls*. I experienced a great desire to work for the conversion of sinners, a desire I hadn't felt so intensely before." See SS 98-99.

¹⁴ After being rejected by the Prioress of Lisieux Carmel and the Bishop of France, she dared to grasp the one instant opportunity to speak to the Pope during the procession to kiss the Pope for blessing. Therese recalled, "instead of kissing it (Pope's hand) I joined my own and lifting tear-filled eyes to his face, I cried out: 'Most Holy Father, I have a great favor to ask you.... Permit me to enter Carmel at the age of fifteen'. While the church guards urged her to rise and leave, the Pope gave her a steady gaze saying "Go.....go... You will enter if God wills it!". See SS134-135. This is a touching moment that shows the fearless passion of the young Therese to answer Jesus' call.

¹⁵ SS 151.

6. *Spiritual Nourishment*

To Therese, her Little Way was mainly nourished by the inspiration of the Scriptures and Jesus teaches her in secret and in silence.¹⁶ Therese did not seem to be much attracted to many spiritual books.¹⁷ Before she had discovered the treasures hidden in the Gospel, since the age of 14, her most treasured book was the “Imitation of Christ” which she always carried in her pocket.¹⁸ At an older age of 17 and 18, Therese relied mainly on St. John of the Cross’s writings as her spiritual nourishment apart from the Scriptures.¹⁹ Without many obvious visions or mystical experiences, she found herself in a direct and intimate relationship with Jesus who lives silently in her and guides her along.²⁰

II. ESSENCE OF THE LITTLE WAY OF SPIRITUAL CHILDHOOD

1. *A Childlike Spirit and Desire*

Therese’s Little Way is founded on the simple nature and littleness of a child. Therese wrote, “I want to seek out a means of going to heaven by a little way,

¹⁶ SS 187.

¹⁷ Even when reading the most beautiful and touching spiritual books, she wrote, “I feel my heart contract immediately and I read without understanding....Or if I do understand, my mind comes to a standstill without the capacity of meditating. In this helplessness, Holy Scripture and the Imitation came to my aid..... But It is especially the Gospels that sustain me during my hours of prayers.... I am constantly discovering in them new lights, hidden and mysterious meanings”. See SS 179.

¹⁸ SS 102.

¹⁹ SS 179.

²⁰ She wrote, “Jesus teaches without the noise of words. Never have I heard Him speak, but I feel that He is within me at each moment; He is guiding and inspiring me with what I may say and do”. See SS 179.

a way that is very straight, very short and totally new”.²¹ In regard to the notion of littleness, two verses of Scriptures are of primary significance in Therese’s development of her Little Way. One is from the Proverb 9:4: “Whoever is a LITTLE ONE, *let him come to me*”.²² The other verse is Isaiah 66:12-13: “As one whom a mother caresses, so will I comfort you; you shall be carried at the breasts, and upon the knees they shall caress you”.²³ In these two Scriptures, we can see the core driving force for her Little Way is being what God wills and being dependent on the caressing love of God. When we think of some common characteristics of a child, we can better comprehend the spiritual childhood of Therese.

Being little, a child always looks up to her parents for their love, care and protection. A child is always subject to faults and imperfections. Yet, she trusts that her parents will always forgive her wrongdoing and love her as she is. A child is too little to climb up by herself and do great things on her own. She just awaits her parents to hold her up and show her the way. A child is simple in nature and offers little things to make her parents happy, like a simple toy or drawing. Sometimes, though little, a child can have a daring and fearless heart. She wants to venture out to prove her love. A child also desires to possess all that her parents have. In times of crisis, a child chooses to stay as where she is left and only awaits her parent’s help. All these childlike characteristics are displayed in Therese’s spirituality. Of course, today, a child can also be rebellious and adventurous who looks for creativity and independence from her parents rather than total submission

²¹ SS 207.

²² SS 188 and 208.

²³ SS 188 and 208.

and obedience. However, given Therese's family upbringing, social and cultural background, it is understandable that she saw her relationship with God and realized her faith through a childlike heart under her own context. Today, any person may find in himself/herself certain elements of these childlike spirits but may choose to express in varied forms and emphasis in their spirituality. In Therese's spirituality, the core of being 'little' remains as the trust to the Father and openness to receive and give love.

2. *Foundation of the Little Way*

Therese's Little Way of Spiritual Childhood was developed upon two foundations. One of them was her primary belief of the Merciful Love of God. The other was her devotion to the sorrowful face of Christ on the Cross, the later of which is of great significance to her understanding and response to suffering.

2.1 Offering to the Merciful Love versus Justice of God

Therese's Little Way was founded on the Merciful Love of God. Under her French Carmelite traditions, a spirituality of fear, judgment and asceticism prevailed which was still under the influence of Jansenism.²⁴ Therese's superiors, confessors and other convent sisters were mostly caught up in a "book-keeping" merit mentality. They were drawn rigorously for self-mortification in order to relieve the wrath of God on themselves and other sinful souls. In fact, as a child, Therese learnt

²⁴ Mary Frohlich, *St. Therese of Lisieux: Essential Writings* (Maryknoll NY:Orbis Books, 2003), 17-18.

from her elder sisters to dedicate to the collection of merits.²⁵ Although grown up under the prevailing emphasis of the law of fear, Therese sought a loving and merciful God instead. The concept of unmerited gift of grace is fundamental to her spirituality. To Therese, the mercy of God precedes and embraces all other divine attributes.²⁶ In her Act of Oblation made on the day of her Habit, June 9, 1895, Therese offered herself as “a VICTIM OF HOLOCAUST TO YOUR MERCIFUL LOVE” rather than God’s Justice for reparation purposes.²⁷

2.2 Devotion to the Passion of Christ

Therese’s spirituality was deeply rooted in her devotion to the Holy Face on the Cross. On one Sunday in July 1887, her contemplative encounter with the image of Jesus in his sorrowful face has a profound impact on her realization of the vocation for sharing the redemptive work of Christ.²⁸ In her own suffering, Therese identified herself with the physical pain of Christ as well as His humiliated suffering of being rejected and misunderstood. Since this moment, Therese felt the cry of Christ, “*I thirst!*”, ignited within her and she wrote, “I wanted to give my

²⁵ As a child, she was trained to practice acts of merits. Sister Agnes brought her a little book and every day she performed as many little acts of mortification and acts of virtue. Within 60 days in Mar 1-May 7 in 1884, Therese had recorded a total of 1,949 acts. See LT 11 March 1-6 1884 Note No. 3, 190.

²⁶ Therese wrote, “He has granted His *infinite Mercy*, and *through* it I contemplate and adore the other divine perfections!”. Therese explained God’s Justice with her childlike spirit, “even His justice seems to me clothed in *love*. What a sweet joy it is to think God is *Just*, i.e., that He takes into account our weakness, that He is perfectly aware of our fragile nature. What should I fear then?” See SS 180.

²⁷ In her Act of Oblation, Therese wrote, “asking You to consume me incessantly, allowing the waves of *infinite tenderness* shut up within You to overflow into my soul, and that thus I may become a *martyr* of Your Love”. See SS 276.

²⁸ At the end of mass, a picture of the crucified Lord on the Cross slipped from its pages showing its pierced and bleeding body. See Francois Jamart, *Complete Doctrine of St. Therese of Lisieux*, trans. Walter Van De Putte (Manila: St. Paul Publications, 1989), 102. The impact of this contemplation is tremendous as she wrote, “I was struck by the blood flowing from one of the divine hands. I felt a great pang of sorrow when thinking this blood was falling to the ground without anyone’s hastening to gather it up. I was resolved to remain in the spirit of the foot of the Cross and to receive the divine dew.” See SS 99.

Beloved to drink and I felt myself consumed with a thirst for souls”.²⁹

Here, Therese was inspired with her mission not just to pray for the souls of priests but also great sinners.³⁰ What attracted her now was those great sinners whom she “burned with the desire to snatch them from the eternal flames”.³¹

3. *Key Characteristics of the Little Way*

There are many aspects of the Little Way that scholars study, such as abandonment, confidence, poverty, humility, obedience, simplicity and charity, etc. I would summarize the key characteristics that best reflect the childlike spirits which make her Little Way distinctive.

3.1 Trust and Abandonment

Therese’s Little Way consists of absolute trust to the merciful love of God. The Little Way is essentially to abandon oneself to follow the wills of the Father with loving obedience and peace as Therese knows that “Jesus does not demand great actions from us but simply *surrender* and *gratitude*”.³² One of Therese’s most well-known images of the Little Way is the image of the elevator. She wrote,

“We are living now in the age of inventions, and we no longer have to take the trouble of climbing stairs..... I wanted to find an elevator

²⁹ SS 99.

³⁰ The traditional Carmelite vocation was to become “the apostle of the apostles” and pray for the priests while they were preaching to souls through their words and examples. See SS 122.

³¹ SS 99.

³² SS 188.

which would raise me to Jesus, for I am too small to climb the rough stairway of perfection”.³³

We should note that the traditional spirituality of her time was still emphasizing the ascent to a spiritual summit with degree of perfection according to the level of purification. Also, self-mortification and acts of merits were the norm in religious life of her time. To Therese, she rather preferred to remain as a child and trust in Jesus to raise her in his arm effortlessly. De Meester comments on the originality of the elevator metaphor as it demonstrates that the road to holiness does not necessarily involve the sense of “progress” or “growing up” at all. It is simply to remain little in the arms of Jesus Christ which means to remain receptive, open to the caring, saving and nurturing love of God and respond with absolute trust and gratuitous love.³⁴ All Therese strived to do was doing God’s will with the belief that if it is God’s desire in her, she would have the strength and desire to do it. She always emphasized, “He has always given me what I desire or rather He has made me desire what He wants to give me”.³⁵ In this way, she was confident that her desires, no matter how childish it was, even like the sudden snowfall at the reception of her Habit, would be granted.³⁶

One may ask whether the child would ultimately grow up and become independent? Therese wanted to remain a little child before God. In answering to Mother Agnes what this meant, Therese said,

³³ SS 207.

³⁴ Conrad De Meester, *With Empty Hands – The Message of St. Therese of Lisieux*, 60-61.

³⁵ SS 250.

³⁶ SS 175.

“It is to recognize our nothingness, to expect everything from God as a little child expects everything from its father..... It was so as not to hear this that I never wanted to grow up.... I’ve always remained little, therefore, having no other occupation but to gather flowers, the flowers of love and sacrifice, and of offering them to God in order to please Him”.³⁷

Here, Therese was not so much concerned about progress or maturity of sanctity but the trust to God with the spontaneous aim of pleasing Him.

3.2 Acceptance of Littleness

Therese acknowledged her faults and imperfection as a little soul and sought to love God through her little acts of love in her daily life. Therese eloquently used many images of littleness to express her Little Way to love God in contrast to the great souls or saints. Therese understood that God creates different kinds of souls, like flowers, and she knew her position and role well.³⁸ During her last years of suffering, Therese willed to persist not to her own glory but simply God’s pleasure. She said to Mother Agnes, “The great saints worked for the glory of God, but I’m only a little soul; I work simply for His pleasure, and I’d be glad to bear the greatest sufferings when this would be for the purpose making

³⁷ LC Apr 6 1897, 138-139.

³⁸ In her image of the “garden of flowers”, Therese illustrated her own positioning among other great souls with confidence and no trace of inferiority. She wrote, “I understood how all the flowers He created are beautiful, how the splendor of the rose and the whiteness of the lily do not take away the perfume of the little violet or the delightful simplicity of the daisy. In Jesus’ garden... He has created smaller ones and these must be content to be daisies or violets destined to give joy to God’s glances when He looks down at his feet. Perfection consists in doing His will, in being what He wills us to be.” See SS 14.

Him smile once more".³⁹

As a little soul, Therese focused on doing little acts of love. She compared her little work with the great work in other souls with the vivid image of the "little brush".⁴⁰ Therese was well contented to work on all the fine details of life to glorify the work of Christ. Also, in her Little Way, Therese did not prefer the ways of some saints who practiced "astonishing mortifications" to expiate sins.⁴¹ Neither did Therese experience a great deal of extraordinary visions and dreams. She herself found these of lesser importance.⁴² Perhaps, the most notable dream that Therese recorded was her seeing the Venerable Anne of Jesus, the Foundress of Carmel in France. The key image in this dream is the "veil" which, as we shall see later, represents an important image for her suffering in hiddenness and darkness. Apart from comforting her that God is content with her, Mother Anne gave her an important affirmation of keeping "empty hands" before God to receive love rather than offering acts of works.⁴³

With a childlike spirit, Therese was not discouraged by her faults and imperfections as she believed that God would not be offended by her

³⁹ LC Jul 16 1897, 102.

⁴⁰ Therese wrote, "I am a little brush that Jesus has chosen in order to pain His own image in the souls.... An artist doesn't use only one brush, but needs at least two; the first is the more useful and with it he applies the general tints and covers the canvas entirely in a very short time; the other the smaller one, he uses for details". See SS 235.

⁴¹ Therese believed that "There are many mansions in the house of my heavenly Father" and she wrote, "I abandon myself to what Jesus sees fit to do in my soul, for I have not chosen an austere life to expiate my faults but those of others". See GC II Jun 21 1897, 1134.

⁴² Therese acknowledged, "I attach no importance to dreams; besides, I have rarely had any meaningful dreams.... Though my dreams are rather fanciful, they are never mystical". See SS 170-171.

⁴³ Mother Anne gave her the gentle words, "God asks no other thing from you. He is content!" See SS 191.

faults. Although Therese had been troubled with scruples since her childhood, at later years, she learnt to release herself from these scrupulous burdens through the simple belief that the Father would always forgive her. In the last sentence of her Manuscript C written while she was very ill, she wrote, “even though I had on my conscience all the sins that can be committed, I would go, my heart broken with sorrow, and throw myself into Jesus’ arms, for I know how much He loves the prodigal child who returns to Him”.⁴⁴

3.3 Reciprocity of Love between Jesus and Human

In Therese’s Little Way, she held fast to a belief that Jesus is thirsty of the love of human and desires much to be loved as human does. Therese used the Gospel story of the Samaritan woman to illustrate how Jesus seeks for the love of human as a beggar of love.⁴⁵ In her childlike spirit, she saw her primary role to please Jesus who was being rejected and misunderstood. She was eager to make Him loved on earth. Therese portrayed Jesus as the sorrowful face who was fatigued and needed rest under her care. This was a very important sentiment that permeated her spirituality and drove her vocation to serve Jesus and other souls. She also recalled Jesus’ disciples who had neglected Jesus.⁴⁶ To some Christians, it may sound too daring to perceive Jesus as the “beggar of human love”. However, according to Bernard Bro, the image of beggary does not represent a weakness or vulnerability of God. Rather, Bro

⁴⁴ SS 259.

⁴⁵ Therese wrote, “when *He is hungry* did not fear to *beg* for a little water from the Samaritan woman. He was thirsty. But when He said: ‘*Give me to drink*’, it was the *love* of His poor creature the Creator of the universe was seeking. He was thirsty for love”. See SS 189.

⁴⁶ Therese saw how even Jesus’ disciples did not understand Jesus. She wrote, “He meets only the ungrateful and indifferent among His disciples in the world... He finds few hearts who surrender to Him without reservations, who understand the real tenderness of His infinite Love.” See SS 189.

regards it as the essence of love, a love that needs to be reciprocated.⁴⁷ He further illustrates that it is God who loves us first so that we can love. Jesus' asking Peter three times if he loved Him shows the first and foremost call of reciprocity of love by Jesus himself to his disciples.⁴⁸

Therese's immense desire to please Jesus can be best illustrated in her famous image of the "little ball". She wrote,

"I had offered myself, for some time now, to the Child Jesus, as His *little plaything*.... To use me like a little ball of no value which He could throw on the ground, push with His foot, *pierce*, leave in a corner, or press to His heart if it pleased Him; in a word, I wanted to amuse *little Jesus*, to give him pleasure."⁴⁹

As we shall see, this childlike desire is not bare talk. It does turn into real acts during her days of immense suffering especially in the last 18 months. We may immediately ask if Jesus really takes pleasure in "throwing and piercing" her. Is this image of "little ball or plaything" just a childish fantasy of an inexperienced nun? The image itself may appear sugary. However, we must note that when she wrote these words, she was already plunged in her darkest days with the torturous illness and spiritual trial. Behind the seemingly fancy image of the "little ball", in her "little" mind, we find an extraordinarily strong will to love and please Jesus till to the last.

⁴⁷ Bernard Bro, *The Little Way: The Spirituality of Therese of Lisieux*, trans. Alan Neame (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1997), 90.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 92.

⁴⁹ SS 136.

3.4. Boldness of Martyrdom

While acting with a childlike simplicity and littleness, there is a daring and aggressive passion within the depth of her soul to be a great saint. She had also been keen to missionary work and if it was not because of her health, she would have joined the Carmel in Hanoi. Therese had boldly claimed,

“No doubt, these three privileges sum up my true vocation: Carmelite, Spouse, Mother; and yet I feel within me other vocations. I feel the vocation of the WARRIOR, THE PRIEST, THE APOSTLE, THE DOCTOR, THE MARTYR.... In spite of my littleness, I would like to enlighten souls as did the Prophets and the Doctors. I have the vocation of the Apostle.....But above all, O my Beloved Savior, I would shed my blood for You even to the very last drop.”⁵⁰

As a cloistered nun in the late 19th Century, these wishes were indeed extraordinary and unimaginable to be fulfilled. However, this bold statement reveals a paradoxical feature of the Little Way in desiring to carry out the most heroic deeds for Jesus in her littleness. It also reveals the constant conflicts and tension of encountering Therese's own weakness against those bold desires of greatness that make her see the need for Christ's help.

Since her childhood, Therese was very fond of Joan of Arc and she

⁵⁰ SS 192 and 193.

always identified herself with Joan's sanctity and martyrdom. Therese was born in 1873 which was two years after the defeat in the Franco-Prussian War. From a socio-historic perspective, at that time, the devout French loyalists were striving to revive the much wounded pride and sense of identity through the widespread promotion of the cult of Joan of Arc.⁵¹ Apparently, Therese was attracted by Joan's childlike personality, her humiliation and martyrdom on behalf of her people. In speaking to Sister Marie regarding a novice, Therese said, "A soldier is not afraid of combat, and I am a soldier".⁵² In her letter to her missionary brother, Belliere, Therese wrote, "You cannot be a saint by halves, you will have to be one totally or not at all."⁵³ We can see that in her littleness, Therese is a fearless warrior who fought her battles for love and by means of love.⁵⁴

III. PRACTICE OF THE LITTLE WAY

Therese practiced her Little Way not without frustration and pain. Like an ordinary person, she had had many struggles and consciously, she had to learn her way through practices and failures. I shall draw some examples to understand how Therese practiced the Little Way in her daily encounters with her superiors and sisters in the convent and in her prayer life.

⁵¹ Mary Frohlich, *St. Therese of Lisieux: Essential Writings*, 88-89.

⁵² LC July 8, 1897, 237.

⁵³ GC II LT 247 June 21, 1897, 1133.

⁵⁴ Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit : Therese of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity*, 241.

1. *Through Humility and Obedience*

Therese understood she was a very little soul and so she could offer God only very little things. However, she grasped every opportunity to prove her love to Jesus through her practice of humility and small acts of sacrifices. At Carmel, Therese always observed the Rule strictly. Therese had to live under the severity of her Mother Prioress.⁵⁵ Though not without internal struggles, Therese tried to respond with love of obedience to her Mother Prioress and convent sisters. Therese saw her superiors as the “compass that Jesus gave her as a sure guide to the eternal shore, even when it seemed that their Superiors were wrong”.⁵⁶ Her obedience is a conscious expression of the love of Christ. Therese realized that “Jesus knew very well that His little flower stood in need of the living waters of humiliation, for she was too weak to take root without this kind of help”.⁵⁷ Vernon Johnson views humility in Therese as not a passive attitude but the most active thing removing faults and failings through the surrender to grace and letting the love of God reign instead of pride and self-love.⁵⁸

As a humble servant, Therese realized the “nothingness” in her hands so as to receive everything from God. She spoke to Mother Agnes, “Even if I had accomplished all the works of St. Paul, I would still believe myself to be a ‘useless servant’. But it is precisely this that makes up my joy, for having

⁵⁵ Therese mentioned that God permitted her Mother Prioress being ‘very severe’. She always had to kiss the floor when meeting her Mother, which was customary when a religious was corrected for a fault. See SS 150.

⁵⁶ SS 218-219.

⁵⁷ SS 206.

⁵⁸ Vernon Johnson, *Spiritual Childhood: The Spirituality of St. Therese of Lisieux*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2001), 71-72.

nothing, I shall receive everything from God".⁵⁹ At the same time, she wanted to catch every small opportunity to practice humility.⁶⁰ Francois Jamart indicates that Therese did practice some mortification acts at the convent, such as mortifying herself by scarcity of food, suffering from the cold without asking for extra blankets during sickness and practicing penances by wearing an iron cross bracelet with points on her hairshirt.⁶¹ However, Jamart comments that these acts of renunciations are not the end in itself but the practice of self-forgetfulness before love reigns in the heart.⁶²

2. *Through Charity*

In her understanding of charity, Therese compared the love commandment by Jesus between the Gospel of Matthew and John. She specifically referred to the new commandment of love by Jesus in John 13:34-35 "*You love one another THAT AS I HAVE LOVED YOU, YOU ALSO LOVE ONE ANOTHER*".⁶³ Therese understood that this new commandment demanded even further from the commandment in Matthew 22:39, "you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Therese clearly found it an impossible task unless Jesus loved them in her.⁶⁴ As we shall see, acknowledging that Jesus loves other souls in her has a significant impact on her understanding of suffering in relation to Jesus and other souls.

⁵⁹ LC 67 June 23, 1897.

⁶⁰ Therese determined "not to allow one little sacrifice to escape, not one look, one word, profiting by all the smallest things and doing them through love" and desired "to suffer for love and even to rejoice through love". See SS 196.

⁶¹ Francois Jamart, *Complete Spiritual Doctrine of St. Therese of Lisieux*, 115-117.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 110

⁶³ SS 219.

⁶⁴ Therese wrote, "never would I be able to love my Sisters as You (Jesus) love them, unless You, O my Jesus, loved them in me." See SS 221. In charity, Therese also acknowledged, "how imperfect was my love for my Sisters. I saw I didn't love them as God loves them. Ah! I understand now that charity consists in bearing with the faults of others, in not being surprised at their weakness, in being edified by the smallest acts of virtue we see them practice." See SS 220.

In her Manuscript C, Therese recalled some incidents of acts of charity. They may sound trivial and have also revealed her internal struggles. However, what makes them noteworthy is her immense desire to offer these acts out of love for God. Central to her acts of charity, it was Jesus in her that enabled her to love.⁶⁵ In a childlike manner, whenever she allowed little sacrifices to slip by, she was not discouraged at all. Rather, she said she would “put up with having little less peace and try to be more vigilant on another occasion”.⁶⁶

3. *Through Prayer with a Simple Heart*

Therese portrayed the power of prayer as “the Queen who has at each instant free access to the King”.⁶⁷ With a simple and spontaneous heart of love to God, Therese prayed with a typically childlike manner.⁶⁸ She explained what prayers meant to her, “prayer is an aspiration of the heart, it is a simple glance directed well as joy; finally it is something great, supernatural, which expands my soul and unites me to Jesus”.⁶⁹ Like an ordinary person, Therese had

⁶⁵ For instance, a sister always made a strange little noise during evening meditation causing great disturbance to her. Therese recalled, “I had a great desire to turn my head and stare at the culprit.... I tried to love the little noise which was so displeasing.... I paid close attention so as to hear it well, as though it were a delightful concert and my prayer was spent in offering this concert to Jesus”. See SS 250. There was another sister whom Therese described as very disagreeable. Therese realized that she could not choose to work for only the person she loved the most. Every person has its inner virtues and beauty that God creates. Therese chose to pray for this sister, offering Him all her virtues and merits. Therese wrote, “I wasn’t content simply with praying very much for this Sister who gave me so many struggles, but I took care to her all the services possible.... Giving her my most friendly smile”. See SS 222-223. On one occasion, this sister asked Therese what had attracted Therese to smile at her. Therese replied that “Ah! What attracted me was Jesus hidden in the depths of her soul; Jesus who makes sweet what is most bitter.” See SS 223.

⁶⁶ SS 250.

⁶⁷ SS 242.

⁶⁸ Therese wrote, “I do not have the courage to force myself to search out beautiful prayers in books. There are so many of them it really gives me a headache!.... I do like children who do not know how to read, I say very simply to God what I wish to say, without composing beautiful sentences, and He always understands me.” See SS 242.

⁶⁹ SS 242.

her weaknesses. She admitted her aridity during prayers when she got distracted and fell asleep but she still held to her simple faith.⁷⁰ When she could not concentrate on her meditation with the rosary, the thought that Mother Mary “must see her good will and be satisfied with it” soon lessened the feeling of desolation.⁷¹ In the eyes of the Father, a child’s goodwill is far more important than her good work.

4. *Through Contemplation of Nature and Arts*

As Jamart points out, in her Little Way, Therese accepted with simplicity whatever joys God sent her by spiritual favors, family, poetry, arts and the charms of nature, whatever that moved her to the thoughts of love and gratitude towards God.⁷² Particularly in the contemplation of the grandeur of nature, Therese felt the great marvels of heaven. On her way to Rome in 1887, Therese was captivated by the beauty of the nature and inspired to face the upcoming trials. She wrote, “I said to myself: When I am a prisoner in Carmel and trials come my way and I have only a tiny bit of the starry heavens to contemplate, I shall remember what my eyes have seen today”.⁷³

IV. ASSESSMENT OF THE LITTLE WAY

To Therese, her Little Way of the Spiritual Childhood is a short and straight

⁷⁰ Therese wrote, “I should be desolate for having slept (for seven years) during my hours of prayer and my thanksgivings after Holy Communion; well I am not desolate. I remember that little children are as pleasing to their parents when they are asleep as well as when they are wide awake”. See SS 165.

⁷¹ SS 243.

⁷² Francois Jamart, *Complete Spiritual Doctrine of St. Therese of Lisieux*, 145.

⁷³ SS 125.

way to sanctity that consists of total trust and abandonment to the wills of God. It bears a childlike desire to please Jesus and give him rest. Many readers may not fully appreciate the childlike character and expression of her faith through some petty sacrifices, trivial family events and her excessive sensitivity. Some may also not be so impressed with the self-repressive mode of sacrifice. However, it is not through any superhuman graces, extraordinary works or profound doctrinal interpretation that makes Therese's spirituality distinctive. Like an ordinary person, Therese shared all the natural tendencies and human weaknesses out of which she strived to seek the only truth of love from God. According to Therese's own experience, the road to God is not solely for the faithful or privileged souls. It is also for the poorest, deprived, lost and rebels. With its centrality on love, the Little Way is not merely "one" way but "the" way to sanctity.

1. A God-Centered Way of Love

The Little Way is essentially a God-centered way of love. Von Balthasar comments that while Therese's Little Way represents the "one" way, it can be described as "the" way as it makes the love of God and our neighbor absolutely central. Therese's way differs from those great souls who go in for extraordinary penances and receive extraordinary mystical grace.⁷⁴ According to Jamart, the Little Way is not found on a particular virtue, such as humility, love, simplicity, confidence or any sum of virtues. It is a special attitude of mind and everything is based on and flows from it.⁷⁵ Johnson

⁷⁴ Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit : Therese of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity*, 298.

⁷⁵ Francois Jamart, *Complete Spiritual Doctrine of St. Therese of Lisieux*, 27.

finds that in her Little Way, Therese saw the smallest details of life, including the smallest suffering, as part of an infinite whole. With God as the center, the Little Way draws the whole universe and every detail of human life within a unity versus the self-centered way full of discords and conflicts.⁷⁶ Steven Payne sees that Therese's Little Way does not represent only a personal discovery of the relationship with God. He emphasizes Therese's contribution to the contemporary understanding of mission as being the vocation of love for the Church that actualizes the 'universal call to holiness' promoted in the Second Vatican Council.⁷⁷ The Little Way starts with one's personal experience, but it is a God-centered way that sees God wholly present in every daily human activity. Rather than a way of climbing, it is a way of descending and patiently waiting for God, the Father, to raise us up.

2. A New Way?

Is Therese's Little Way a brand-new way? Calling Therese the "master of the spiritual life", Pope John Paul II commented that what Therese provides is not any new systematic theological interpretations nor private devotion but a totality of spiritual-led action and reflection.⁷⁸ Therese's Little Way is not generally seen as a ground-breaking way but rather, a refreshed inspiration back to the core of the Christian faith in the Scriptures. Eugene McCalfrey sees Therese's way not as a doctrine but a fresh and vigorous re-statement of the basic Christian truth. In her experience of the intensity of love, the old religious clichés, such as victim, sacrifice, abandonment and oblation, were

⁷⁶ Vernon Johnson, *Spiritual Childhood: The Spirituality of St. Therese of Lisieux*, 177.

⁷⁷ Steven Payne, *St. Therese of Lisieux: Doctor of the Universal Church* (New York: Society of St. Paul, 2002), 211-212.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 219.

given back their original beauty, purified and renewed.⁷⁹ Von Balthasar regards Therese's way deeply rooted in the living, unwritten tradition of the Church yet not cowed by any authority because to her, the measure is only made by the ultimate standard, i.e. word of God.⁸⁰ Hence, Von Balthasar sees Therese's way as original and masterly as she has experienced and tested herself on everything before she wrote and taught.⁸¹

3. *An Easy Way?*

As this simple Little Way is accessible to every ordinary person with ordinary acts of love, is it an easy way to sanctity? The answer could be yes or no. On the affirmative side, Therese simply acted as a child and fully depended on her Heavenly Father. It seems to be within everyone's means. However, when we allow ourselves to be loved by Jesus, we have to abandon ourselves without any reservation. When Therese claimed that she "chooses it all",⁸² it essentially includes every bit of her life including her body, soul and mind. We cannot settle into mediocrity but must be prepared for a complete abandonment as a child. Bro comments that the Little Way is no easy task as it demands a kind of "intoxicating trust" through darkness till the last.⁸³ As we shall see her suffering in the next Chapter, her Little Way is a rough one especially in her last 18 months of immense physical suffering and spiritual darkness.

⁷⁹ Eugene McCalfrey, "The Real Therese is Elusive" in *St. Therese: Doctor of the Little Way*, ed. Francis Mary (New Bedford, MA:Franciscan Friars of the Immaculate, 1997), 26.

⁸⁰ Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit: Therese of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity*, 57.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 301.

⁸² SS 27.

⁸³ Bernard Bro, *The Little Way: The Spirituality of Therese of Lisieux*, 37.

4. *A Short Way to Destiny?*

The Little Way is in fact an ongoing journey. According to Bro, like Therese, everyone experiences transitional situations from desires to despairs in life. Despite an immense desire to love, one soon realizes that he or she cannot manage to climb the first step of the stairway and find oneself too little to do great things.⁸⁴ In Therese's experience, the Little Way is an ongoing journey with each day to discover new imperfections and receive God's sanctifying grace.⁸⁵ Even when Therese envisioned her Little Way as short and straight, it is, in a rather paradoxical sense, a progressing way of becoming even smaller and smaller. In her letter to her sister, Marie, she wrote, "Ask that your little daughter always remain a little grain of sand, truly unknown, truly hidden from all eyes, that Jesus alone may be able to see it, and that it may become smaller and smaller, that it may be reduced to *nothing*...."⁸⁶ Therese was always conscious to avoid pride and glory even within humility.⁸⁷ She wished her whole life be seen only by the eyes of Jesus Christ.

V. THE LITTLE WAY: A LIFE JOURNEY TO SEEK AND EXPERIENCE LOVE

The Little Way of Spiritual Childhood is a way of trust and abandonment. It is

⁸⁴ Ibid., 40.

⁸⁵ Therese wrote, "now I am astonished at nothing. I am not disturbed at seeing myself weakness itself. On the contrary, it is in my weakness that I glory, and I expect each to discover new imperfections in myself". See SS 224.

⁸⁶ GC I LT 49 May 12-20 1888, 427.

⁸⁷ She wrote to Mother Agnes, "The grain of sand does not desire to be humbled; this is still too glorious since once would be obliged to be occupied with it. It desires only one thing, to be FORGOTTEN, counted for nothing!.... But it desires to be seen by Jesus". See GC I LT 95 Jul-Aug 1889, 580.

not an abstract form of perfection but a vivid living experience of tears, fear, misery, trials, joy, peace and hope. It is also a dialectic tension between greatness and littleness. The way to great sanctity is actually a way to littleness and nothingness. Considering its centrality in the merciful love of God which embraces justice and other divine attributes, the Little Way of Spiritual Childhood can be regarded as “the” way of love to sanctity.

We may then ask if it is the “perfect” way. Perhaps, there is no such “perfect way” as human can define. Everything is God’s grace and as Therese said, “For me to love You as You love me, I would have to borrow Your own Love, and then only would I be at rest, O my Jesus”.⁸⁸ As Therese quoted from John 6:44, Jesus says, “No man can come after me, unless the FATHER *who sent me draw him*.”,⁸⁹ the Little Way of the Spiritual Childhood is a gift of grace to those who open their heart to Jesus. Vividly, Therese had experienced the flames of Jesus’ love burning in her heart. She could not help running towards Jesus as she wrote,

“I ask Jesus to draw me into the flames of His love, to unite me so closely to Him that He live and act in me. I feel the more the fire of love burns within my heart, the more I shall say, ‘Draw me’.... These souls will run swiftly in the odor of the ointments of their Beloved, for a soul that is burning with love cannot remain inactive”.⁹⁰

Hence, the more we open our heart to God, the greater our desire to love. The more love God gives us, the more we use His love to love him and others

⁸⁸ SS 256.

⁸⁹ SS 257.

⁹⁰ SS 257.

in return. To be able to taste the true joy of love, the “child” in our hearts needs to be fully awakened and nurtured. However, this Little Way does not go without trials, falls and suffering. In the next Chapter, I shall study what kinds of suffering Therese experienced and how she interpreted and responded to these sufferings in her distinctive Little Way.

CHAPTER TWO

EXPERIENCE OF SUFFERING

During her short span of life, Therese experienced suffering in both exterior and interior form. Therese's "Little Way" shows us that the way to sanctity embraces an ordinary life with no necessity for extraordinary events or mystical experiences. It is purely the openness to God so that we can act for, through and in Love. In Therese's own experiences of suffering from early childhood to adulthood at Carmel, we indeed cannot trace extraordinary forms of suffering that one may find it distinctive or regard as martyrdom in a traditional religious or socio-political sense. Her sufferings are mainly associated with the loss and separation in familial relationship, personal spiritual trials and endurance of physical pains. Every ordinary person may encounter a certain level of these sufferings in their life. However, at a closer examination of her inner responses, we would find that the gravity of this seemingly ordinary suffering is not ordinary at all. To Therese, the suffering was so intense that she found no consolation and it drove her quest for the existential meaning of suffering. As we shall see, her seemingly ordinary suffering is in harmony with her spirituality of the "Little Way" in which she experienced the greatness of love only in her littleness and similarly, profound peace found only in suffering.

In this Chapter, I shall explore the suffering Therese experienced from psychosocial, physical and spiritual perspectives. I would analyze how Therese perceived and actually responded to these sufferings in regard to her

relation with God. As a human, Therese did not always stay fearless and fully resistant to temptations. I shall trace the path of her spiritual maturity in experiencing and understanding suffering. Accepting as a helpless child and running to the arms of the loving Father, Therese willed to suffer for the love of Jesus Christ and die of love in the footstep of Christ.

I. MAJOR EXPERIENCES OF SUFFERING

I shall outline the major suffering experiences in Therese's life by two periods, i.e. before and after entering Carmel, as recalled in her writings and as witnessed by her sisters. This helps us trace her maturity in her perception and response to suffering. I shall then summarize the key elements of her responses to suffering at different life stages.

1. *Before Entering Carmel (1873 – 1888)*

Loss of Separation in Familial Relationship

From a psycho-social perspective, Therese's suffering is associated with the loss of family separation and death since her early childhood. Her mother died when she was a happy child of 4 years old. Her mother's death had brought profound changes to her personality to become a timid and sensitive child.¹ As the smallest child in the Martin family, Therese was then looked after by her elder sisters, Pauline and Marie, whom she regarded as her second mothers. Later, the respective departure of

¹ SS 34.

these two beloved sisters to Carmel when Therese was aged 9 and 13 was another big blow to her little psychology. The painful separation has further shaped her childhood character as being unsocial, tearful and overly sensitive. Therese was, hence, very much emotionally attached to her family, especially her father and sister Celine, as well as her deceased mother and four siblings.²

At the age of 8 and 9, Therese was already burnt with a great desire to do great things for God. In her little mind, she perceived suffering as a way to become a saint. She wrote,

"I understood to become a saint, one had to suffer much.... each soul was free to respond to the advances of Our Lord.... to *choose* among the sacrifices He was asking..... as in the days of my childhood, I cried out, 'My God *I choose all!*' I don't want to be a *saint by halves*, I'm not afraid to suffer for You, I fear only one thing: to keep my *own will*; so take it, for '*I choose all* that You will!'"³

At this time, little Therese saw suffering as a sacrifice that she was willingly to take up in order to become a saint. At the age of 9, she was first rejected by Mother Marie de Gonzague to enter Carmel and her mind was much tormented. She acknowledged her immature sadness as she wrote, "my soul was FAR from being mature, and I was to pass through many crucibles of suffering before attaining the end I so much desired".⁴

² Silently, the little Therese always sought spiritual support from her deceased mother and four siblings in heavens. When Marie, whom she always confided in, entered Carmel, Therese turned to heaven and confided in her sadness to the "four angels", her dead brothers and sisters. This has shaped her ardent affiliation with the communion of saints since a very young age. See SS 93.

³ SS 27.

⁴ SS 59.

What was her desire then? At this early stage, her desire was to answer Jesus' divine call to be a nun at Carmel. Suffering remains as a "means" to attain the "end" of her saintly desires.

Scrupulous Struggle

Since her childhood to the ages of 12 and 13, Therese had been suffering from many scruples in her daily life. For instance, even the childhood pleasure of putting on some pretty sky-blue ribbons by her Aunt on her hair would seem to be a sin to her.⁵ However, among these scrupulous experiences, Therese had gained a deeper feeling of her own weakness and helplessness. A greater dependence for God's care was being nurtured.

Another major psycho-social struggle during her childhood is after her miraculous cure by the smile of the Blessed Virgin at the age of 10.⁶ Therese was caught in a feeling of guilt and confusion after the cure as she thought she should not have told her sisters about the cure of the Blessed Virgin. The exact sentiment behind is not clearly explained but according to her writing, Therese was troubled by the questions of her sisters about the image of the grace.⁷ To Therese, it was the beautiful smile of the Blessed Virgin that struck her but others were excited about

⁵ SS 89.

⁶ Therese wrote, "For a long time after my cure, however, I believed I had become ill on purpose and this was a real martyrdom for my soul". See SS 62. She referred the experience as a real spiritual trial, "The memory of the ineffable grace I had received was a real spiritual trial for me for the next four years and I was not to find my happiness until I was kneeling at the feet of Our Lady of Victories" (November 4 1887, the eve of her trip to Rome). See SS 66.

⁷ Therese wrote, "They asked me if the Blessed Virgin was carrying the Child Jesus, or if there was much light, etc. All these questions troubled me and caused me much pain.... And seeing that the Carmelites had imagined something else entirely (my spiritual trials beginning already with regard to my sickness), I thought I had lied." See SS 67.

seeing clear divine images and visions of light, etc. This implies a significant difference of the attitude of faith by love that Therese discovered at a very young age versus the attitude of faith by seeing with mystical flavor among her contemporary religious circles. Therese admitted that the Blessed Virgin permitted this torment for her soul's good.⁸ She started to treasure the goodness of humiliation versus vanity in her upcoming religious life.

1.3 Encounter of Christ in Her First Communion

When receiving her first Communion at the age of 11, a marked day of significant encounter with Jesus Christ, Therese was deeply touched by what she described as the "first kiss of Jesus!"⁹ Therese experienced herself vanishing as a "drop of water" lost in the immensity of the ocean where Jesus alone remained.¹⁰ On the day after her first Communion, she experienced a new depth of the desire for suffering as she wrote,

"I felt born within my heart a *great desire* to suffer, at the same time, the interior assurance that Jesus reserved a great number of crosses for me. I felt myself flooded with consolations so great that I look upon them as one of the greatest graces of my life. Suffering became my attraction; it had charms about it which ravished me without my understanding them very well. Up until this time, I had suffered without loving suffering, but since this day, I felt a real love

⁸ SS 67.

⁹ Therese wrote, "how sweet was that first kiss of Jesus... I *felt* that I was *loved*, and I said: 'I love You and I give myself to You forever!' There were no demands made, no struggles, no sacrifices;" See SS 77.

¹⁰ SS 77.

for it”.¹¹

We can see that in this encounter, Therese’s desire to suffer started to grow out of her “love” for Jesus and she related it as the great “graces” of God. At this stage, Therese is, of course, still a young girl inexperienced in the reality of human fragility and hardship. However, an important essence has already developed in her perception of suffering. It is a “loving attraction” towards suffering rather than just seeking suffering as a means to be a saint or martyr, an end that she has always dreamed of since her childhood.

1.4 Painful Martyrdom of Rejection

At the age of 14 when she was waiting for her uncle’s blessings to enter Carmel, Therese recalled a “painful martyrdom” during the three days of Oct 19 to 22, 1887.¹² This is both a psychosocial and spiritual experience of suffering. Therese used a special analogy of Joseph and Mary seeking little Jesus in the temple which revealed a profound understanding of suffering in light of her encounter with Jesus.¹³ Here, Therese was identifying herself with Jesus and even the holy family. Notably, she realized that it was God who willed to send her the painful moments as in the situation of Joseph and Mary. Guy Gaucher also relates this metaphor of the 3-day martyrdom to her identifying with Jesus

¹¹ SS 79.

¹² SS 109.

¹³ Therese wrote, “God willed to send me a painful martyrdom lasting *three days*. Oh! Never had I understood so well as during this trial, the sorrow of Mary and Joseph during their three-day search for the divine Child Jesus. I was in a sad desert, or rather my soul was like a fragile boat delivered up to the mercy of the waves and having no pilot. I knew Jesus was there sleeping in my boat, but the night was so black it was impossible to see Him; nothing gave me any light..... I felt I was all alone in the garden of Gethsemane like Jesus, and I found no consolation on earth or from heaven”. See SS 109.

Christ's 3 days of crucified death in the tomb which foretells all the dark nights that will be her everyday experience in Carmel.¹⁴ Therese also identified herself with Jesus alone in the garden of Gethsemane receiving no consolations. This identification paved the way for her to seek and accept the truth of suffering. We should note that while Therese described her fragility and helplessness as a fragile boat, she was still certain that Jesus was with her on the boat even though he appeared to be sleeping.

2. *After Entering Carmel (1888 – 1897)*

2.1 *Adaptation to Community Life*

At Carmel, the 15-year-old Therese had to face a new community life with the severity of her Mother Prioress and some disagreeable nuns. We can easily imagine her psychosocial struggles in her transition from a closely-knitted and well protected family to live with other adults in a small enclosed convent. As we have seen in Chapter One, Therese had strived to overcome these hardships in practicing obedience, humility and charity. However, she could not hide her feeling of continual suffering when she had to resist the natural inclinations to her three blood sisters at Carmel.¹⁵ Also, at her early years at Carmel, she was still very conscious about her faults and imperfections. On May 22, 1888, only when Father Pichon gave her an assuring word that she had never committed a mortal sin, she became much relieved from her

¹⁴ Guy Gaucher, *John and Therese: Flames of Love*, trans. Alexandra Plettenberg-Serban (New York: Alba House, 1999), 80-81.

¹⁵ SS 216.

psychosocial fear as well as the traditional religious fervor of counting merits.¹⁶

2.2. Spiritual Trials of Faith before and after her Profession

While the most notable darkness of faith experienced in Therese was in her last eighteen months, spiritual trials had already assailed her at an earlier time at Carmel. During the retreat before her Profession on Sep 8, 1890, a spiritual darkness engulfed her when she even thought she did not have a vocation. Therese was always conscious about the temptation of the devil and it was only her acknowledgement of her weakness and acceptance of humiliation that helped her resist the temptation.¹⁷ Again, the importance of humiliation is affirmed that becomes one of the central characteristics of her Little Way as well as her responses to suffering.

Shortly after her Profession, her scrupulous feeling still remained and she even questioned about the existence of heaven. At a retreat in October 1891, Therese received words of assurance from Father Alexis Prou.¹⁸ She then again found the strength of love over the fear of faults or the wrath of God. As a child, Therese had always been conscious of doing good and pleasing God. However, only through the realization of the

¹⁶ SS 149.

¹⁷ Therese wrote, "but the devil inspired me with the assurance that it wasn't for me.... The darkness was so great that I could see and understand one thing only: I didn't have a vocation". When sharing this feeling with her Novice Mistress, she wrote, "she completely reassured me. The act of humility I have just performed put the devil to flight since he had perhaps thought that I would not dare admit my temptation." See SS 166.

¹⁸ She wrote, "At that time I was having great interior trials of all kinds, even to the point of asking myself whether heaven really existed..... He (Father Prou) told me that my faults caused God no pain,... God was very much pleased with me.....My nature was such that fear made me recoil; with love not only did I advance, I actually flew". See SS 173-174.

merciful love of God that Therese was able to accept her own faults and imperfections. Through these suffering experiences, she gradually experienced the real submission to the merciful love of God and realized the relation between the love and justice of God.

2.3 Mental Illness and Death of Louis Martin

On a psychosocial level, perhaps Therese's most severe suffering lied in the mental illness and subsequent death of her beloved father in 1894. After a period of sickness, Louis Martin entered a mental institution in Caen on February 12 1889 which caused the greatest pain and trial to Therese and her blood sisters. Therese wrote, "our dear father would drink the most *bitter and most humiliating of all chalices*. Ah! That day, I didn't say I was able to suffer more!"¹⁹ His father's mental illness meant not just physical suffering but humiliation as viewed in the 19th Century French context. Some people even regarded that Louis' illness was attributed to his three daughters joining the convent.²⁰

However, Therese did not complain to God over the suffering of her father. From her father's suffering, Therese discovered the grace of suffering. At the age of 5 or 6, Therese had a prophetic vision of her father stooping in the garden with his head covered with a veil.²¹ This prophetic vision

¹⁹ SS 156-157.

²⁰ At that time, Martin's another daughter, Celine, was still with him and after his death she also joined her sisters at Carmel.

²¹ In the summer of 1879 or 1880, Louis Martin was on business trip at Alencon. The vision took place in broad daylight when Therese saw a man dressed like her papa in the garden. He was "much more stooped" and his head was covered by "a sort of apron of indistinct color and it hid his face". To Therese, this prophetic vision still remained in her heart after fifteen years. At later years, she realized, "It was indeed Papa, who was bearing on his venerable countenance and white hair symbol of his glorious trial. Just as the adorable Face of Jesus was veiled during His Passion, so the face of His faithful servant had to be veiled in the days of his sufferings in order that it might shine in the heavenly Fatherland near its Lord, the Eternal Word!". See SS 45-47.

is very critical to the understanding of suffering by Therese in identifying his father's suffering with Jesus Christ as the Suffering Servant. In the midst of intense psychological torments, Therese still believed that her father's illness was the greatest grace from God and he was in the loving good hand of God.²² De Meester observes that there is an allusion attached to Louis's fading mental faculties which has made him like a child but God will take care of him.²³

The suffering related to her father's illness essentially highlights the idea of mercy and the gratitude to God's Love. Therese wrote,

"Papa's three years of martyrdom appear to me as the most lovable, the most fruitful of my life; I wouldn't exchange them for all the ecstasies and revelations of the saints. My heart overflows with gratitude.....My desire for suffering was answered, and yet my attraction for it did not diminish."²⁴

Here, Therese had likely identified her papa's "three years of martyrdom" with Jesus' "three-year" mission on earth suffering for saving the souls whom he loves. As we shall discuss in more detail in the next Chapter, the image of the Suffering Servant and the Adorable Holy Face becomes the center of her spirituality towards her apostolic vocation in her own suffering.

²² Therese wrote to her sister Marie, "And the Lord loves Papa incomparably better than we love Papa; he is God's little child". See GC I LT 91 End May 1889, 564.

²³ Conrad De Meester, *The Power of Confidence: Genesis and Structure of the Way of Spiritual Childhood of St. Therese of Lisieux*, trans. Susan Conroy (New York:Alba House, 1998), Note 32, 92.

²⁴ SS 157.

2.4 Spiritual Aridity

Throughout her religious life in Carmel, Therese had continuously suffered spiritual aridity.²⁵ Often, she felt distractions and sleepiness in prayers, could not confide in her confessors and did not find any consolations or inspirations through most spiritual books except the Scriptures and her favorite texts from St. John of the Cross and the Imitation of Christ. Despite the aridity, Theses still said, "I was still the happiest of creatures since all my desires had been satisfied."²⁶ Particularly during her final years, these desires have literally become the desires for suffering.

2.5 Physical Suffering with Tuberculosis

On April 2, 1896, which was the Thursday night before the Good Friday, Therese spilled blood the first time. From this time onwards through her death in the next 18 months, Therese continued to suffer immense physical pain due to tuberculosis. On that day, her first response reflected her intimate relationship with Jesus as a spouse. She wrote, "I was interiorly persuaded that Jesus, on the anniversary of His own death, wanted to have me hear His first call. It was like a *sweet and distant murmur that announced the Bridegroom's arrival*".²⁷ However, in reality, her physical suffering cannot be over-romanticized. In the 19th Century,

²⁵ Therese described her spiritual aridity as her "daily bread" and she is "deprived of all consolations". See SS 157. She overcame only through a childlike simple prayer as she wrote, "sometimes when my mind is in such a great aridity that it is impossible to draw forth one single thought to unite me with God, I would very slowly recite an "Our Father" and then the angelic salutation... then nourish my soul much more than if I had recited them precipitately a hundred times." See SS 243.

²⁶ SS 157.

²⁷ SS 211.

medication for tuberculosis was not sophisticated and in monastic custom, Therese was not given any morphine or painkillers until at full death agony. She had to bear the unbearable suffering of fevers, blood coughing, short breath and intestine infection, etc. Her deteriorating condition had also deprived her of the reception of Holy Communion since August 19 which had caused her great pain.

Here, we could trace some of her human responses to understand more the physical torments she had gone through. Closer to Therese's death, her sister, Mother Agnes, recalled that her feet was swollen and they couldn't even move her or touch her as it caused her much suffering.²⁸ At the infirmary, Therese said, "Ah, to suffer in my soul, yes I can suffer much.... But as to suffering of body, I'm like a little child, very little. I'm without any thought, I suffer from minute to minute".²⁹ Therese also had to face the uncertainty of death. She said, "I'm afraid I've feared death, but I won't fear it after it takes place..... Oh! No.... what is this mysterious separation of the soul from the body? It's my first experience of this but I abandon myself to God".³⁰ One day, Therese even exclaimed that "if she had not had any faith, she would have committed suicide without an instant's hesitation".³¹ On her last day, Therese rattled for two hours in her last agony. With her sisters at the bed, Therese spoke her last words regarding suffering: "Oh it's pure suffering because there isn't any consolation in it. No not one!..... Oh mother, I no longer believe in

²⁸ LC Sep 13 1897, 189.

²⁹ LC Aug 26 1897, 170.

³⁰ LC Sep 11 1897, 188.

³¹ LC Sep 22 1897, 196.

death for me... I believe only in suffering!"³² Her sisters recalled that she was looking at her crucifix saying, "Oh I love Him!". In her last agony, Therese confessed that her suffering was a "pure" suffering and at that moment, all she could believe is suffering itself, not death or even heaven.

2.6 Trial of Faith in the last 18 months

Following her first spilling blood on Good Friday, Therese plunged immediately into a severe trial of faith since April 5, 1896 which lasted for 18 months until her death. There are two main aspects of her spiritual trial. She fell into a tormented darkness of faith without any consolations from others or even God and she even reached the stage of doubting the existence of heaven. At the same time, she also vividly experienced the thought and feeling of those impious, non-believing and atheist souls living at her time.³³

Therese used a lot of images to describe the unspeakable depth of the plunge, such as dark tunnel, fog, wall and subterranean passage. Her feeling can best be presented by this writing:

"At this time, I was enjoying such as living faith, such as clear faith, that the thought of heaven made up all my happiness, and I was

³² LC Sep 30 1897, 229-230.

³³ She wrote to Mother Agnes, "If you only knew what frightful thoughts obsess me! Pray very much for me in order that I do not listen to the devil who wants to persuade me about so many lies. It's the reasoning of the worst materialists which is imposed upon my mind; Later, unceasingly making new advances, science will explain everything naturally; we shall have the absolute reason for everything that exists and that still remain a problem, because there remain very many things to be discovered, etc." See LC Aug 1897, 257.

unable to believe there were really impious people who had no faith. I believed they were actually speaking against their own inner convictions when they denied the existence of heaven.... Jesus made me feel that there were really souls who have no faith, and who, through the abuse of grace, lost this precious treasure, the source of the only real and pure joys. He permitted my soul to be invaded by the thickest darkness, and that the thought of heaven, up until then so sweet to me, be no longer anything but the cause of struggle and torment. This trial was to last not a few days or a few weeks, it was not to be extinguished until the hour set by God Himself and this hour has not yet come. I would like to be able to express what I feel, but alas! I believe this is impossible. One would have to travel through this dark tunnel to understand its darkness.”³⁴

Jean-Francois Six sees Therese’s night of nothingness as a trial of “faith without seeing”. Six emphasizes that the trial is not merely a vague emotional blockage or abstract question but a real existential presence of those who deliberately remove the God who is Love from their life.³⁵ The dark tunnel is primarily a perception of the immeasurable distance between the Infinite Love and the imperfect finite of Therese’s heart which felt keenly attracted to the Love which also loves her so badly.³⁶ In this trial, Therese has been drawn by this Abyss of Love without seeing anything.

³⁴ SS 211-212.

³⁵ Jean-Francois Six, *Light of the Night: The Last Eighteen Months in the Life of Therese of Lisieux*, trans. John Bowden (London:SCM Press 1996), 30.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 134.

This darkness was so deep that she could not even rely on any sweet image of heaven and her clear faith in the past.³⁷ To her, the trial was no longer “a veil” but a “wall” that reached right up to the heavens and covered the starry sky.³⁸ She confessed to Mother Gonzague, “Mother....I don’t want to write any longer about it; I fear I might blaspheme....”³⁹ To a young nun who had been so pious and faithful to the call of Jesus, this darkness was no simple occasional spiritual struggle but a profound experience of the night of nothingness, apparently with no consolation from human and even explicitly from God.

How did Therese respond in this severe trial of faith? We can understand Therese’s response from two major aspects. Firstly, in this darkness, Therese simply wanted to believe that God wills this suffering in her. She wrote, “When I sing of the happiness of heaven.... I feel no joy in this, for I sing simply what I WANT TO BELIEVE”.⁴⁰ Amidst the darkness without any joy of faith, Therese sought to continue her acts of faith. She wrote, “He (Jesus) knows very well that while I do not have the joy of faith, I am trying to carry out its works at least. I believe I have made more acts of faith in this past year than all through my whole life.”⁴¹

Another aspect of her response focused on her apostolic mission. In

37 Therese wrote, “When I want to rest my heart fatigued by the darkness that surrounds it by the memory of the luminous country after which I aspire, my torment redoubles.... a night still more profound, the night of nothingness.” See SS 213.

³⁸ SS 214.

³⁹ SS 213.

⁴⁰ SS 214.

⁴¹ SS 213.

truly experiencing what the impious people feel and think, Therese resigned to eat at the table of sinners and lead these people to the arms of Jesus Christ.⁴² Therese realized that “she cannot run to Jesus alone” but “all the souls whom she loves follow in her train” towards the odor of Jesus’ ointments.⁴³ Her zealous desires for apostolic martyrdom remain in the darkness of faith. She boldly declared, “I tell Him I am ready to shed my blood to the last drop to profess my faith in the existence of heaven.... I am happy not to enjoy this beautiful heaven on this earth so that He will open it for all eternity to poor unbelievers.”⁴⁴ Therefore, in deep agony at her deathbed, Therese still said, “Never would I have believed it was possible to suffer so much! Never! Never! I cannot explain this except by the ardent desires I have had to save souls”⁴⁵

II. ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF THERESE’S REPONSES TO SUFFERING

From the above suffering experiences before and after entering Carmel, we can summarize several key elements of Therese’s responses based of which the theological meaning of suffering can be discerned.

1. *Wills to Believe*

⁴² Therese wrote, “She is resigned to eat the bread of sorrow as long as You desire it.... “Have pity on us, O Lord, for we are poor sinners!” (reference to Luke 18:13)..... O Jesus, if it is needful that the table soiled by them be purified by a soul who loves You, then I desire to eat this bread of trial at this table until it pleases You to bring me into Your bright Kingdom.” See SS 212.

⁴³ SS 254.

⁴⁴ SS 213-214.

⁴⁵ LC Sep 30 1897, 205.

As there was no consolation and Jesus seemed to be sleeping in her days of suffering, Therese could only 'will' to believe that it was God who wills this suffering in her. As a child, she was content of whatever God desires in her. Therese wrote, "even though I were not to see Him, I love Him so much that I'm always content with what He does, I wouldn't love Him less if He were not to come and steal me away".⁴⁶ Therese had used the image of a weak little bird to describe her 'wills' to fly toward Jesus. The little bird dares to gaze upon the Divine Sun of Love and even if flying is out of its little power, it can still raise its little wings. When the little thing falls asleep, it still believes all the time that it is fixing its gaze upon its Adorable Star. If the Adorable Star remains hidden, the little bird will "remain wet, accepting its numbness from the cold and rejoicing in its suffering which it knows it deserves."⁴⁷

2. *Acceptance of Littleness and Weakness*

Therese sought to accept her littleness and weakness in times of suffering which is in harmony with her Little Way to depend on the Father's care.⁴⁸ As such, Therese found profound peace in suffering as God always makes her desire what He wants to give her.⁴⁹ In accepting her littleness and weakness,

⁴⁶ LC Jul 6 1897, 75.

⁴⁷ SS 198-199.

⁴⁸ During the sickness of their father, Therese encouraged her sister Celine and wrote, "Let us suffer the bitter pain, without courage!.... What does it matter, my Jesus, if I fall at each moment; I see my weakness through this and this is a great pain for me.... now You will be more tempted to carry me in Your arms.... If You do not do it, it is because this pleases You to see me on the ground.....Then I am not going to be disturbed, but I shall always stretch out my arms suppliant and filled with love! I cannot believe that You would abandon me!" See GC I LT 89 Apr 26 1889, 557.

⁴⁹ Therese said, "My heart is filled with God's will, and when someone pours something on it, this doesn't penetrate its interior; it's a nothing which glides off easily, just like oil which can't mix with water. I remain always at profound peace in the depths of my heart; nothing can disturb it." See LC Jul 14 1897, 97-98.

Therese stressed not only the actual need to rely on God's help but fundamentally the attitude of carrying our crosses "feebly" to experience the truth of love.⁵⁰ De Meester points out that ordinarily it will be difficult to prove our love by suffering without failing. However, weakness which increases suffering also increases the possibility of proving our love.⁵¹ Therese is certain that God would give her the courage in proportion to her sufferings.⁵²

3. *Heaven Here and Now*

To Therese, her heaven is here on earth in her suffering. In her suffering experiences, she could not find or in fact no longer seek the sweet image of heaven. She had found happiness and joy on earth solely in suffering.⁵³ Therese also regarded suffering only as "an instant" now because as she said, "when we think of the past and the future, we become discouraged and fall into despair".⁵⁴ Jesus makes her think of all He desire her to do at the "present moment".⁵⁵ During the last few months, Therese admitted that she had reached the point where she could not suffer any longer because "all suffering is sweet" to her.⁵⁶ We might wonder if it was a reflection of being at the peak of suffering and she had become numb to any further suffering. However, central to her spirituality, everything is "grace" that includes all

⁵⁰ Therese wrote to her sister, Celine, "What an unspeakable joy to carry our Crosses FEEBLY..... The grain of sand wants to get to work, without *joy*, without *courage*, without *strength*.....it wants to work through love". See GC I LT 82 Feb 28 1889, 537.

⁵¹ Conrad De Meester, *The Power of Confidence: Genesis and Structure of the Way of Spiritual Childhood of St. Therese of Lisieux*, 108.

⁵² Therese said, "God gives me courage in proportion to my sufferings. I feel at this moment I couldn't suffer any more, but I'm not afraid, since if they increase, He will increase my courage at the same time". See LC Aug 15 1897, 149.

⁵³ LC Jul 31 1897, 123.

⁵⁴ LC Aug 19 1897, 155.

⁵⁵ SS 165.

⁵⁶ LC May 29 1897, 52.

suffering and her perpetual desire to suffer since her first Communion.⁵⁷ Only in suffering, she tasted the reality of heaven. To her, death means only the “entering of life”.⁵⁸

4. *Suffering for Other Souls*

Therese responded to her suffering in light of her apostolic mission. In her farewell note to her spiritual brother, Belliere, she wrote,

“Yes, I am happy, not at being delivered from suffering here below.....I am happy to die because I feel that such is God’s will and that much more than here below I shall be useful to souls who are dear to me..... and I shall leave no rest to God if He does not give me all I shall want!....”⁵⁹

For being useful to other souls, Therese was not referring only to her spiritual brothers and the priests that the Carmelite nuns had been dedicated to pray for. She was referring specifically to the conversion of great sinners.⁶⁰ From an apostolic perspective, Therese understood the use of suffering for loving and saving souls as willed by Christ. After making her Act of Oblation, she confidently claimed, “I know that Jesus cannot desire useless sufferings for us, and that He would not inspire the longings I feel unless He wanted to grant them.”⁶¹

⁵⁷ LC Jul 13 1897, 123.

⁵⁸ Therese wrote to Belliere, “I am not dying, I am entering into Life, and all that I cannot say to you here below, I will make you understand from the heights of heaven....” See GC II LT 244 Jun 9 1897, 1128.

⁵⁹ GC II LT 253 Jul 13 1897, 1139.

⁶⁰ SS 99.

⁶¹ SS 181.

III. SUFFERING IN HER LITTLE WAY

Throughout her short life, Therese went through intense psychosocial, physical and spiritual sufferings. As any ordinary person does, she has had her struggles and failings. However, seeing herself as a weak and helpless child, Therese acknowledged the need of trust and abandonment to God's will. In the midst of extreme darkness, like a little bird, she still willed to sing and gaze at the Adorable Sun. Her apostolic zeal was also burned along with her suffering. Therese was not fear of any more suffering as she found increasing courage from God as suffering increased. However, more distinctive in her responses to suffering is that paradoxically, accepting her littleness, Therese sought not to suffer courageously but 'feebly'. It was only in the abyss of Christ's love that she found the core meaning of suffering.

After studying Therese's experiences of suffering and her responses at different life stages, we may immediately ask if one must suffer in order to love Jesus, as what Therese did? Is suffering being a necessary means that leads to sanctity or to achieve apostolic purposes? What special role does suffering play in Therese's Little Way of Spiritual Childhood? In the next Chapter, I shall analyze the theological meaning of suffering in Therese's spirituality and address these questions.

CHAPTER THREE

THEOLOGICAL MEANING OF SUFFERING AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO THE LITTLE WAY

In studying the theological meaning and practice of suffering in Therese's spirituality, there are three major focuses of interpretations. These interpretations are not mutually exclusive and are to be examined as a whole. Firstly it is a functional focus where suffering serves as a way leading to personal purification or sanctity. Secondly, suffering is stressed in its redemptive dimension as human suffering becomes an instrument willed by Christ to participate in His work of salvation. This co-redemptive function is closely linked with the theological understanding of the human union with the Mystical Body of Christ. Lastly, suffering is understood in light of its relation with love. Suffering is beyond a pure expression of human experiences or desires and has its own existential meaning that point to the core of human nature.

I find that while all of the above elements are present in Therese's experiences in regard to her relation with God and vocation, I would argue that suffering is not just a means in attaining sanctity or fulfilling apostolic goals. It is the process and end in experiencing the loving presence of God. The rationale is grounded in the suffering as an expression of the divine love of Christ and hence, suffering becomes an integral part of love. God himself is Love. Suffering is a grace given by the merciful God so that human may

be able to act for Love, with Love and through Love. The co-redemptive function of suffering is vital as our apostolic vocation to follow the footstep of Jesus Christ, the Suffering Servant. However, in Therese's spirituality, I find that suffering has no salvific value by itself. As love consists of suffering, it is essentially the love for, through and in Christ that can draw non-believers and sinners to Jesus Christ.

In the first part of this Chapter, I shall analyze the theological meaning of suffering as Therese experienced and perceived. I shall draw relevant studies from scholars on their interpretations of suffering in Therese. In the second part of the Chapter, I shall explore the connection of the Little Way to suffering. Therese's Little Way does not simply enable her to overcome the pains and trials and persevere to the end. Grounded in love, the Little Way itself is in some way associated with the mystery of suffering.

I. THEOLOGICAL MEANING OF SUFFERING

Therese has a double religious name which is 'Therese of the Child Jesus and Holy Face', the later one added on Jan 10, 1890, the year after her father, was sent to the mental institution. Both religious names show her Christ-centered spirituality and are closely related in the interpretation of the meaning of suffering. For the name 'Child Jesus', it may represent that Jesus loves us and gives himself to us in the form of helpless child.¹ Child Jesus may also refer to Therese's offering herself as Jesus' little plaything

¹ Steven Payne, *St. Therese of Lisieux: Doctor of the Universal Church*, 201.

with which he could amuse himself as he pleased.² As for the 'Holy Face', Jesus' infinite love is revealed in the face of a Suffering Servant who is veiled, hidden, humiliated and is thirst for love for human souls. As we shall discuss, to Therese, the meaning of suffering is closely associated with her devotion and imitation to the Child Jesus and Holy Face, especially the later.

In this section, I shall first examine the foundation of her devotion to the Holy Face and how this has shaped her views and responses to suffering. Then, I shall analyze the various interpretations of suffering and illustrate how, among these inter-related interpretations, the dominant and fundamental meaning of suffering is centered on its relation to love.

1. Foundation of Her Devotion to the Holy Face

To understand the theological meaning of suffering in Therese's spirituality, the most significant aspect is her devotion to the Holy Face, as distinctly experienced by two of her visions and articulated in her Acts of Oblation to the Merciful Love.

Prophetic Vision of Her Veiled Father

As discussed in Chapter Two, the prophetic vision of her veiled father in the garden has led Therese to identify her father's later suffering to Jesus Christ, the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53. The humiliation that her father endured resembled that of Christ. However, it did not mean a cruel reality that her father, Therese and her blood sisters could merely accept

² Francois Jamart, *Complete Spiritual Doctrine of St. Therese of Lisieux*, 265.

and endure. In reading Isaiah 53 which had become the foundation of her devotion to the Holy Face, Therese discovered the secret of God's mercy. Suffering had become a 'privilege of love' to her father as this chalice is willed by Christ. At her later years in the depth of God's mercy, Therese saw no longer her father's veiled face but God's face veiled during the darkness of her own trials.³

Contemplative Vision of the Crucified Christ

Another significant aspect of her devotion to the Holy Face is her contemplative vision of the Crucified Christ. Therese always reflected on the adorable Holy Face where she found the secret of love and suffering. The image of Christ on the Cross has several important impacts on Therese's views and responses to suffering.

Firstly, it points to the central essence of God's merciful love. Therese wrote to her sister Celine, "Jesus is on fire with love for us....Look at His eyes lifeless and lowered! Look at His wounds..... Look at Jesus in His Face.... There you will see how He loves us."⁴ To Therese, divine love is expressed in Jesus' suffering on the cross for saving souls.

Secondly, Therese experienced the reciprocity of love as Jesus is longing to love as well as to be loved. In contemplating Christ on the Cross, she was determined to console the Lord to "wipe away all blood and tears of Jesus".⁵ In her childlike simplicity of love, her life goal is to please

³ Bernard Bro, *The Little Way: The Spirituality of Therese of Lisieux*, 62.

⁴ GC I LT 87 Apr 4 1889, 553.

⁵ GC I LT 98 Oct 22 1889, 591.

Jesus, make Him loved and make Him smile once again. Being very ill in the infirmary, she still said, "I'd be glad to bear the greatest pains when this would be for the purpose of making Him smile only once".⁶

Thirdly, Therese's fire for apostolic mission was ignited. She wrote, "*I thirst!* These words ignited within me an unknown and very living fire. I wanted to give my Beloved to drink and I felt myself consumed with a *thirst for souls*."⁷ Before the bleeding image of the Crucified Christ, Therese was struck by how precious the blood was wasted and not one to collect it and pour it over souls. Inside Therese, her apostolic zeal to participate into the work of redemption was burned. In fact, after her contemplated vision of the Crucified Christ picture, Therese excitingly found her long-held prayers for the conversion of a death-sentenced criminal, Henri Pranzini, was answered by Jesus. Therese called Pranzini her 'first child', the lost soul that Jesus gave her to pray for.⁸

Fourthly, Therese experienced the hidden and silent Christ on the cross. The image of the veil was consistently used in her writing, such as her veiled father in the garden and the dream of the veiled Mother Anne. The notion of the veiled hiddenness and silence brings profound meaning to her suffering.⁹ As Von Balthasar indicates, the Divine Face is both a hiding and revealing God and our life participate in this same mystery of

⁶ LC Jul 16 1897, 102.

⁷ SS 99.

⁸ Henri Pranzini was executed on August 31, 1887 and upon his execution, Pranzini was seen as taking hold of the crucifix the priest was holding out to him and kissed the sacred wounds three times. Therese believed this was a sign Jesus granted her for the repentance of the criminal whom Therese had dedicatedly prayed for. See SS 99-100.

⁹ Therese wrote, "...a subterranean passage where I see nothing but a half-veiled light, the light which was diffused by the lowered eyes of my Fiance's Face... My Fiance says nothing to me and I say nothing to Him either except that I love Him more than myself." See GC I LT 110 Aug 30-31 1890, 651.

hiding and revealing.¹⁰ To Therese, as Von Balthasar suggests, the veil is from thin to thickening because the overpowering light breaks through so searing that a veil must be drawn in again. Otherwise, her earthly life should be consumed.¹¹ The vision of the lowered eye also bears special meaning in suffering to Therese. Von Balthasar aesthetically describes the communication between Christ and Therese as if Therese and Jesus could not both raise their gaze at the same time. Therese lowers her eyes if the gaze of God is to rest upon her and God lower his eyes so that Therese gazes unwaveringly upon Him. Sometimes, there are things that are so deeply hidden can only be revealed through hiddenness, similar to those inexpressible spiritual thoughts that Therese referred to.¹² Also, Bro indicates that in the silence of Christ, Therese experienced a type of love that is not just self-mortification but by the force of humiliation, willing to join the deprived and those who are no longer able to speak.¹³

Lastly, Therese wanted to imitate the Holy Face to be hidden, forgotten as well as to suffer. She wrote, "Ah I desired that like the Face of Jesus, my face be truly hidden, that no one on earth would know me....I thirsted after suffering and I longed to be forgotten."¹⁴ The Holy Face is neither a loving gaze nor a cherished face but rather he turns completely away as if he is abandoning us. However, in Therese's situation, she remains

¹⁰ Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit : Therese of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity*, 224.

¹¹ Ibid., 220.

¹² Ibid., 226. Therese wrote, "There are certain things that lose their perfume as soon as they exposed to the air; they are deep spiritual thoughts which cannot be expressed in human language without losing their intimate and heavenly meaning." See SS 77.

¹³ Bernard Bro, *The Little Way: The Spirituality of Therese of Lisieux*, 35.

¹⁴ SS 152.

faithful in love.¹⁵ As Paul McPartlan describes, when a child is held in mother's arms, it cannot easily see the mother's face but the child is certain of God's embrace and hence would not worry if it could not see Him in darkness.¹⁶

Act of Oblation to the Merciful Love of God

The interpretation of suffering by Therese can also be discerned in her Act of Oblation. Therese offered herself as the 'Victim of holocaust to God's Merciful Love' and she thanked for God's graces, especially the "grace of making her pass through the crucible of suffering".¹⁷ Here, Therese offered herself not to suffering itself but to the will of God. She was offering to the "Infinite Tenderness", the "fire of Love" to consume her and become "the martyr" of God's Love. She confessed her desires to have the Divine Glance cleanse her soul, consuming all imperfections and to die of love to the eternal embrace of the Merciful Love.¹⁸ This Act of Oblation was made in June 1895 and Therese had intensely lived out her offering as the victim of love in suffering for the final two years of her life.

2. Interpretations of the Meaning of Suffering

I shall analyze various interpretations of the meaning of suffering in Therese's spirituality as revealed in her own writings and by scholars along with three

¹⁵ Mary Frohlich, *St. Therese of Lisieux: Essential Writings*, 23.

¹⁶ Paul McPartlan, "Introduction" in *The Little Way: The Spirituality of Therese of Lisieux*, Bernard Bro,

x.
¹⁷ SS 277.

¹⁸ SS 276-277.

main focuses.

Suffering Leads to Sanctity.

One of the most common interpretations of suffering is its functional role to purify human before the union with God. Referring to Jesus' teaching on the kernel of wheat in John 12:24, Therese wrote,

"I see that suffering alone gives birth to souls, and more than ever before these sublime words of Jesus unveil their depth to me...unless the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it will bring forth much fruit".¹⁹

Kenneth Russell suggests that Therese sees suffering as the prerequisite for salvation as it detaches us from material things and reminds us of our destiny in Christ.²⁰ In Russell's view, Therese demonstrates that we can pick and choose for greater or less suffering. If we dare to love much, we will suffer accordingly.²¹ From a functional perspective, De Meester explains that suffering brings the opportunities for Therese to experience her weakness, deepen her awareness of the fleeting nature of time and earthly value and let her love Jesus more purely and exclusively.²² In this respect, Therese herself did write, "Sanctity does not consist in saying beautiful things, it does not even consist in thinking them, in feeling them! It consists in suffering and suffering everything."²³

¹⁹ SS 174.

²⁰ Kenneth C. Russell, "St. Therese of Lisieux on Suffering" *Spiritual Life* 46 (Winter 2000): 233.

²¹ Ibid., 233.

²² Conrad De Meester, *The Power of Confidence: Genesis and Structure of the Way of Spiritual Childhood of St. Therese of Lisieux*, 89.

²³ GC I LT 89 Apr 26 1889, 557-558.

2.2 Suffering is Redemptive.

The co-redemptive function is grounded in the theological understanding of the Mystical Body. Jesus suffered on the Cross for the salvation of human and he continues to suffer in the members of his Mystical Body. Johnson refers to Colossian 1:24 to explain the redemptive function of the Mystical Body of Christ for the whole human race. The Church's passion is interpreted as the extension of Christ's passion and redemptive work. Hence, by our willingness to accept suffering, Christ continues to suffer in us for saving souls.²⁴

The focus of this interpretation is that suffering is understood in light of the redemptive mission of Christ and those who follow Him. Payne indicates that Therese identified herself with Jesus, the incarnate love as Jesus identifies with the poor and marginalized who count for nothing.²⁵ Referring to John 4:35, Therese saw herself as the co-worker of Jesus in the harvest field because Jesus loves us and wills to let us share his redemptive work.²⁶

2.3 Suffering is integral to love.

Suffering is also interpreted as an integral part of love. Suffering is seen as an expression of divine love as reconciling men to God through

²⁴ Vernon Johnson, *Spiritual Childhood: The Spirituality of St. Therese of Lisieux*, 174-175.

²⁵ Steven Payne, *St. Therese of Lisieux: Doctor of the Universal Church*, 203.

²⁶ Therese wrote to sister Celine, "Is not Jesus all-powerful?... Why, then, does Jesus say: 'ask the Lord of the harvest that he send some workers?'... it is because Jesus has so incomprehensible a love for us that He wills that we have a share with Him in the salvation of souls. He wills to do nothing without us. The Creator of the universe awaits the prayer of a poor little soul to save other souls redeemed like it at the price of all His Blood." See GCII LT135 Aug 15 1892, 753.

Christ's own suffering on the Cross.²⁷ According to Johnson, the Blood of the Cross is the whole object of Love as Jesus, by complete abandonment to the Father's will on the cross, becomes the fulfillment of love for the Father and Son.²⁸ Johnson regards Therese's 'suffering obedience' to the wills of God to die of love resembles what Jesus shows to His Father.²⁹

Furthermore, suffering is associated with the mutuality of love. Jamart sees that suffering is a matter of love as God's proof that He loves us and the response of our love to His love.³⁰ Similarly, Johnson indicates that Therese was offering pain to Jesus as the greatest proof and perfect expression of her love for Him.³¹ Referring to the mystery of the double spirit or twofold love that Therese mentioned, Von Balthasar interprets that Therese was asking not only that the Lord suffers and loves with her and in her but she also suffers and loves with her brothers.³² In order for her to suffer and love, Therese had acknowledged she had to "borrow God's love" and "love is repaid by love alone."³³

3. *Is Suffering Just a Means?*

From the first two interpretations, suffering is viewed mainly as the means to

²⁷ Vernon Johnson, *Spiritual Childhood: The Spirituality of St. Therese of Lisieux*, 7.

²⁸ Ibid., 15.

²⁹ Ibid., 162.

³⁰ Francois Jamart, *Complete Spiritual Doctrine of St. Therese of Lisieux*, 169.

³¹ Vernon Johnson, *Spiritual Childhood: The Spirituality of St. Therese of Lisieux*, 166.

³² Therese wrote, "Remembering the prayer of Elisha to his father Elijah when he dared to ask him for HIS DOUBLE SPIRIT.... O Blessed Inhabitants of heaven, I beg you to ADOPT ME AS YOUR CHILD.... I dare to ask you to obtain for me YOUR TWOFOLD LOVE". See SS 195-196. Also see Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit: Therese of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity*, 209.

³³ SS 195.

sanctity and redemption of souls. Even for the third interpretation seeing suffering as an integral part of love, some of the interpretations are inclined to treat suffering as a means of proving our love to Christ. In this section, I would further analyze suffering in its relation to love and illustrate that in Therese's spirituality and practice, suffering is not just a means but the process and end of the loving presence of Christ.

Suffering as Grace and a Privilege of Love

Under the sanctifying interpretation, suffering becomes a consequence of human pursuit of sanctity and the severity of suffering would rely on the degree of love we dare to offer. However, we must note that suffering is not just an act initiated and opted by human for the purpose of sanctity and union of God. As De Meester indicates, holiness is not to be achieved by own actions but a gift from God.³⁴ In Therese, the notion of trust and abandonment to the will of God is central to her pursuit of sanctity, as in the image of the little boat with white sail. When a varied degree of suffering exists, it is God who wills it and gives consolation as He wishes. When Sister Marie asked if it was possible to love God as Therese loved him, Therese simply replied, "My desires of martyrdom are nothing.....These desires are a consolation that Jesus grants at times to weak souls like mine, but when He does not give this consolation, it is a grace of privilege...."³⁵ In face of the darkness of suffering, Therese was purely at the disposal of God's grace.

³⁴ Conrad De Meester, *With Empty Hands – The Message of St. Therese of Lisieux*, 50-51.

³⁵ GC II LT 197 Sep 17 1896, 999.

While Therese emphasized that sanctity consists in suffering, what is really sanctifying and purifying is the Fire of Love, not suffering itself. Therese vividly recalled,

“Since the happy day (Jun 9 1895), it seems to me that Love penetrates and surrounds me, that at each moment this *Merciful Love* renews me, purifying my soul and leaving no trace of sin within it, and I need have no fear of purgatory.... The Fire of Love is more sanctifying than is the fire of purgatory.”³⁶

For and with this Fire of Love, Therese was plunged into suffering and even the death of love. She wrote, “nothing could prevent me from flying away, for I no longer have any great desires except that of loving to the point of dying of love, June 9.”³⁷ At this point, suffering is no longer a desire for the sake of purification and sanctity. The Divine Love’s consuming fire has integrated with her suffering and finally the death of love.³⁸

Suffering is where Christ suffers in us to saves souls.

In regard to the co-redemptive function, suffering may sometimes appear to have its own salvific value. However, I would rather see that suffering embraces the passion for apostolic mission, but it is only Christ who suffers and works in us for the salvation of souls and not humans who

³⁶ SS 181.

³⁷ SS 214.

³⁸ In her poem written in February 1895, “Living on Love”, Therese wrote, “Dying of Love is a truly sweet martyrdom, And that is the one I wish to suffer.... Flame of Love, consume me unceasingly. Life of an instant, your burden is so heavy to me! Divine Jesus, make my dream come true: To Die of Love.....” See Guy Gaucher, *John and Therese: Flames of Love*, 136-137.

deliberately choose to suffer and possess any mystical power to save souls. What humans do is to open up themselves to receive Christ to work in them. This is essentially the work of the Holy Spirit and Therese had vividly experienced the work of Christ in her. She always insisted that it was Christ who lived in her that gave her the desires and capacity to do all the acts of love including suffering. She wrote, “when I am charitable, it is Jesus alone who is acting in me, and the more I am united to him, the more also do I love my sisters”.³⁹

In the devotion to the Holy Face, it is essentially love that draws Jesus to suffering. Therese, in imitating and following Christ to suffer, is also drawn by love. It is based on this love that Therese or any Christ’s followers become eager to participate into Christ’s continuous work of salvation. While suffering and martyrdom has been her desires since her childhood, at a later stage, the more matured Therese no longer “chose” to suffer but “willed” only what Jesus “wills”. The source for the co-redemptive characteristics of suffering is still God’s merciful love. God has proved to us that He is the infinite mercy because He gave us His Son to suffer so that we are transformed in Him and incorporated into the Mystical Body.⁴⁰ Once we accept love from Christ, suffering is not a matter of a deliberate choice or instrument to be a co-worker of Christ to save souls. Christ does not need human’s help in his redemptive work but wants us to take part of it as a gesture of love. Suffering is where Christ loves and suffers in us that draw other souls to his Mystical Body.

³⁹ SS 221.

⁴⁰ Francois Jamart, *Complete Spiritual Doctrine of St. Therese of Lisieux*, 59-60.

3.3 Suffering is united with love, as part of human nature.

Suffering united with love is manifested in Therese's offering herself as the Victim of Love, with the sole purpose to love Christ and make Him loved. In fact, at the age of 11 after receiving her first communion, Therese's little heart was filled with this ineffable love that Jesus lives in her as what the Apostle Paul felt.⁴¹ However, suffering is more than a necessary means to prove our love to Christ as if Christ rejoices in human suffering. As the little victim of the merciful love, Therese felt the interiority of suffering permeating throughout her mind, body and soul. She wrote, "For is there a joy greater than that of suffering out of love for You? The more interior the suffering is and the less apparent to the eyes of creatures, the more it rejoices You."⁴² Two months before her death, Therese wrote to Belliere, "The thought of heavenly bliss not only causes me not a single bit of joy, but I even ask myself at times how it will be possible to be happy without any suffering.....we must go to heaven by the same way, that of suffering united to love".⁴³

Suffering as united with love has become part of human nature. Therese wrote to Celine, "Let us not believe we can love without suffering, without suffering much...Our poor nature is there! And it isn't there for nothing.... It is so precious that Jesus came on earth purposely to take possession of it."⁴⁴ According to Von Balthasar, suffering is the summit

⁴¹ On the second Holy Communion received one month after the first one, Therese wrote "the second visit of Jesus! My tears flowed again with an ineffable sweetness and I repeated to myself these words of St. Paul 'It is no longer I that live, it is Jesus who lives in me! (Galatians 2:20)'" See SS 79.

⁴² SS 214.

⁴³ GCII LT 258 Jul 18 1897, 1152.

⁴⁴ GCI LT 89 Apr 26 1889, 557.

of a creature's attainments, most precious gift of God and most precious offering that a creature gives back to Him.⁴⁵ To Therese, suffering is regarded as the highest potentiality of human nature.⁴⁶

From the above analysis, we can see that to love is to suffer and suffering as united with love becomes part of human nature, given as a grace and privilege of love by God. Love naturally grows with suffering together. It is not a matter of human choice to accept only either love or suffering or to select a varied degree of suffering. As suffering and love are mysteriously associated, it is absolutely at God's will. The ideal here is not suffering much but loving much. As Therese declared, her vocation is Love, as the Church is seen as Love and the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ. While both the sanctifying and redemptive dimension is of great significance in the interpretation of suffering, they are both grounded in the Merciful Love of God. Therese's spirituality and her whole experience of suffering are based on her offering as the victim of the merciful love of God, distinctly demonstrated by her devotion to the Holy Face of Christ.

II. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SUFFERING AND THE LITTLE WAY

As discussed in Chapter One, Therese's Little Way of Spiritual Childhood is a way of love with an absolute trust and abandonment to the Father,

⁴⁵ Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit : Therese of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity*, 307.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 308.

acceptance of one's littleness and weaknesses, fulfillment of the mutuality of love between Christ and human, and the boldness to open ourselves to receive the graces and desires by Christ. There is no doubt that through her childlike devotion to Christ, Therese acquired the will power to go through her suffering and trials. However, we may further ask if the Little Way itself is in some unique way associated with suffering, apart from enabling Therese to endure suffering. Based on the childlike characteristics in Therese's spirituality, we can try to trace the connection. I find the core connection lies in her childlike spirit of **"I Choose All"**.

1. The Meaning of "I Choose All"

In her Little Way of Spiritual Childhood, Therese knew that everything is grace including all her weaknesses and desires. The notion of "ALL" embodies a mutuality of love between God and human and this "ALL" spirit is realized in multiple aspects in the relation between God and Therese. Therese boldly claimed to Jesus, "I Choose All" because at the same time, she knew that what the Father has is also hers.⁴⁷ This "ALL YOURS IS MINE" includes Christ's love and suffering for all souls. As her youthful dream of martyrdom, she dared to say, "To satisfy me I need *all*. Like You, my Adorable Spouse, I would be scourged and crucified..... I would accomplish *all* of them for You."⁴⁸

⁴⁷ As a child, when her sister Leonie asked her little sisters to choose from a basket filled with dresses and pretty pieces, little Therese already said "I choose all!" See SS 27. In her childhood, she cried out, "My God, 'I choose all!' I don't want to be a saint by halves.... For I 'choose all' that You will". See SS 27. During the final year of intense illness and spiritual trial, she still wrote with a tremendous boldness when praying for the souls that Jesus gave her, "I pray for them... for those whom you have given me, because they are yours; and all things that are mine are yours, and yours are mine". See SS 255. Using the word of the father of the prodigal son in Luke 15:31, Therese specified, "EVERYTHING that is mine is yours'. Your words, O Jesus, are mine, then I can make use of them to draw upon the souls united to me the favors of the heavenly Father". See SS 256.

⁴⁸ SS 193.

Hence, if God wants it, she wants it too. Therese fully understood her childhood privilege under the mutuality of “ALL” as she wrote, “He wants me to love Him because He has forgiven me not much but ALL.”⁴⁹ As the summit of her spiritual life, she discovered her vocation: “LOVE COMPRISED ALL VOCATIONS... MY VOCATION IS LOVE.....I have found my place in the Church..... I shall be *Love*”. As such, she could boldly claim, “Thus I shall be everything, and thus my dream will be realized.”⁵⁰

2. *The Practice of “I Choose All”*

When Therese chose “ALL” and became everything, she was essentially trying to abandon her own will, remaining in her littleness and submitting only to the loving wills of Christ. Hence, in her Little Way, she was not blindly, proactively or specifically asking for sufferings. Therese knew clearly in her littleness, she could not handle suffering out of her own will or for her own will. In harmony with her ‘little’ logic, she wrote,

“I would never want to ask God for greater sufferings. If He increases them, I will bear them with pleasure and with joy because they will be coming from Him. But I’m too little to have any strength through myself. If I were to ask for sufferings, these would be mine, and I would have to bear them alone, and I’ve never been able to do anything alone.”⁵¹

When the Little Way seeks for the full openness to God’s love by “choosing it

⁴⁹ SS 84.

⁵⁰ SS 194.

⁵¹ LC Aug 11 1897, 145.

all", suffering as united to love becomes a blended feature of the Little Way. In her well-known image of the 'little ball', Therese opened herself for the Child Jesus to be loved, pierced, played, set aside, held in arms or let idle in silence by Jesus.⁵² Even for her spiritual aridity, as Gaucher points out, the sleep of Therese resembles the sleep of Jesus. If Jesus is asleep within her, Therese also falls asleep.⁵³ Here, Therese's life is being consumed in the fire of love and Jesus vividly lives in her. Human's active response of "choosing it ALL" paradoxically means the "self abandoning of ALL". In her Little Way, Therese spontaneously received Jesus to love, act and suffer in her. Hence as what Therese does in her Little Way, we simply offer to suffer everything that will please Christ and he freely grants us the sacrifices.⁵⁴ It is ultimately God who chooses us 'ALL' and gives us 'ALL'.

III. SUFFERING : A LOVING PRESENCE OF GOD

In Therese's spirituality and life experience, suffering has become an integral part of love that she had tested and lived out throughout her short life. While suffering embraces the purposes of purification and apostolic mission, the most fundamental meaning of its existence is in its relation to love. Suffering is not sought but given as a grace and privilege of love by God. In Therese's Little Way, her full openness to receive God's love has let her experience the flames of the Divine Love and realize her martyrdom dream to die of love, in the footstep of Jesus Christ.

⁵² SS 136.

⁵³ Guy Gaucher, *John and Therese: Flames of Love*, 75.

⁵⁴ Francois Jamart, *Complete Spiritual Doctrine of St. Therese of Lisieux*, 220.

Having looked at the theological meaning of suffering, on the practical side, we may then wonder if Christ must will us to suffer in order to love and be loved? Would this make God a masochist or sadistic God who allows so much suffering on earth? In her Little Way, as discussed in the previous two Chapters, we must note that Therese offered herself to the merciful love rather than the justice of God. She had experienced and viewed suffering in light of God's mercy which she perceived as embracing all other divine attributes. God treasures our love to him rather than our suffering. The following writing shows us that Therese was well aware of what God really wants from her in suffering:

“For a long time I have not belonged to myself since I delivered myself totally to Jesus, and He is therefore free to do with me as He pleases. He has given me the attraction for a complete exile and He has *made me understand all the sufferings* I would meet with, asking me if I would want to drink this chalice to the dregs; I wanted to seize this cup immediately when Jesus presented it, but He withdrew His hand and made me understand that my resignation alone was pleasing to Him.”⁵⁵

Here, God is not a masochist or vengeful God, but a God with merciful and folly love towards all souls. Christ is thirsty of our love. With a childlike spirit, Therese was not saying blindly or naively to “choose all” but throughout her life, she experienced the consuming love of Christ. She could then say, “I desire to suffer for love and even to rejoice through love... I shall not come

⁵⁵ SS 218.

upon one without unpetalling it for You..... I shall sing even when I must gather my flowers in the midst of thorns”.⁵⁶ To Therese, love even surpasses faith and hope. She made this distinctive claim:

“God communicates Himself at times in the midst of great splendor or ‘*gently veiled, under shadows and figures*’. It was in this way He deigned to manifest Himself to our souls, but how *light and transparent* the veil was that hid Jesus from our gaze! Doubt was impossible, faith and hope were unnecessary, and Love made us find on earth the One whom we were seeking.”⁵⁷

With love as the center of her Little Way of Spiritual Childhood, she could say in a confident yet little way, “Perfection seems simple to me, I see it is sufficient to recognize one’s nothingness and to abandon oneself as a child into God’s arms”.⁵⁸ Suffering becomes an essential part of her love.

Having analyzed the theological meaning of suffering in Therese’s spirituality and her practice of suffering in her Little Way, in the next Chapter, I shall assess how Therese’s understanding of suffering contributes to the spiritual life of modern Christians and any limitations and challenges that we may find in her spiritual teaching on suffering.

⁵⁶ SS 196.
⁵⁷ SS 104.
⁵⁸ GCII LT 226 May 9 1897, 1094.

CHAPTER FOUR

KEY CONTRIBUTIONS AND LIMITATIONS

In Therese's spirituality, suffering is experienced as united to love as a special grace by God. At different life stages, Therese had intensely suffered psychosocially, physically and spiritually. However, along with her spiritual maturity especially since her father's illness, Therese had confidently claimed that she was suffering in profound peace. At her later life in Carmel, suffering had even become the only thing left on earth that Therese could believe and find attraction. She was being drawn into the abyss of love of Christ in which she believed that suffering was willed and acted by Christ in her. Since Therese was a Catholic nun living under monastic religious traditions in the 19th Century, is her spiritual teaching on suffering still relevant to lay Christians in modern contexts? What are likely the limitations in her spiritual teaching?

In this Chapter, I shall assess the key contributions of Therese's theological understanding and practices of suffering to Christians today. This would include specific areas where Therese's teaching has given new perspectives or meaning from the spiritual traditions of her time. I shall also identify any limitations and challenges posed to Therese's ways of viewing suffering that worth more reflection and assessment.

I. KEY CONTRIBUTIONS

Therese's key contributions in the understanding of suffering are based on her Christ-centered life offered to the Merciful Love. I shall first examine how Therese's spirituality enriches or differs from her Carmelite spiritual traditions. Then, I shall identify her other contributions to the understanding of suffering for Christians today.

1. *Therese and St. John of the Cross*

Therese was a dedicated follower of her Carmelite father, St. John of the Cross. Her spirituality and writings were profoundly affected by the teaching of St. John of the Cross.¹ Therese's ideal of love which interpreted the existential meaning of suffering was much affected by St. John's spirituality. St. John's teaching on "More he (God) wants to give, more he makes us desire" has become a great pillar of support to Therese throughout her life.² Another primary expression of love by Therese being affected by her spiritual father was the consuming fire of love as in St. John's Spiritual Canticle.³ A prominent text that Therese quoted from St. John was about her desperate

¹ Among the collected works of Therese, 105 explicitly quotations were from St. John of the Cross: 48 from the Spiritual Canticle and 16 from the Living Flame of Love. Therese was instinctively drawn to St. John's works that deal with transformative union and got much illumination there. See Guy Gaucher, *John and Therese: Flames of Love*, 16.

² St. John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, revised ed., trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington:ICS, 1991), Letter 15 to Madre Leonor de San Gabriel, Jul 8 1589, 750. See Guy Gaucher, *John and Therese: Flames of Love*, 30, SS 250 and SS 276.

³ St. John of the Cross wrote, "... they follow until, having entered the interior wine cellar to drink, all transformed in love, they lose it entirely. In this wine cellar these herds of imperfections are more easily consumed than are the rust and tarnish of metal consumed by fire". See St. John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, The Spiritual Canticle, Stanza 26, 580.

desire to see God face to face in her love-consummated life.⁴ While Therese was much illuminated by St. John of the Cross, she had discovered her own way of love and suffering. There are several examples that demonstrate how the young Therese expanded the spiritual teaching of her great master.

1.1 Suffering is grounded in Love.

In regard to suffering, the notable impact of St. John on Therese includes his famous saying, "Lord, to suffer and be despised for you" as frequently adopted in Therese's own writing.⁵ In her testimony, Sister Marie of the Trinity, one of Therese's novices, recalled that Therese was able to quote graciously very long passages from St. John especially in times of her great trials.⁶ However, while Therese shared this same desire of St. John to suffer and be despised for Christ, Therese further experienced that the source and way for suffering is essentially love. On May 7 1896, Therese gave Sister Marie of the Trinity a photograph of a painting by Mother Agnes on St. John of the Cross. Beneath the image, Therese wrote, "Through love, to suffer and to be despised". This is no casual scribble. It represents a significant addition by Therese to her Carmelite master's formula on the theological meaning of suffering in association

⁴ Therese wrote, "It is, then, of the greatest importance that the soul exercise herself much in Love in order that, consuming herself rapidly, she hardly stops here below and arrives promptly in seeing her God Face to Face". See LT 245 Jun 1897, 1129. Therese quoted from St. John's writing in *The Living Flame of Love*, "It is vital for individuals to make acts of love in this life, so that in being perfected in a short time they may not be detained long, either here on earth or in the next life, before seeing God", See St. John of the Cross, *Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, Stanza 1, Commentary No. 34, 656. Also see Guy Gaucher, *John and Therese: Flames of Love*, 42-43.

⁵ Guy Gaucher, *John and Therese: Flames of Love*, 9-12.

⁶ Sister Marie of the Trinity referred to St. John of the Cross's writing, "O souls who in spiritual matters desire to walk in security and consolation! If you but knew how much it behooves you to suffer in order to reach this security and consolation, and how without suffering you cannot attain to your desire.... You instead carry the cross.... You would consider it good fortune that, dying to this world and to yourselves, you would live to God in the delights of the spirit, and patiently and faithfully suffering exterior trials, which are small, you would merit that God fix his eyes on you and purge you more profoundly through deeper spiritual trials in order to give you more interior blessings." Quoted from *Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, *The Living Flame of Love*, Stanza 2, Commentary No. 28. See Guy Gaucher, *John and Therese: Flames of Love*, 25

with love.⁷

1.2 To die of love is not to die in transports.

According to St. John of the Cross, for those who have gone through the active and passive nights of purifications, i.e. consumed by love, death comes as gentle and sweet and takes place in the midst of the 'most sublime impulses' and 'delightful encounters of love'.⁸ However, to Therese, to die of love is not to die in transports. As she experienced, God has carried out her desire of death of love in intense suffering, resembling Jesus' death in agony on the Cross. At her deathbed, she told her sisters:

"Our Lord died on the Cross in agony, and yet this is the most beautiful death of love. This is the only one that was seen.... To die of love is not to die in transports. I tell you frankly, it seems to me that this is what I am experiencing."⁹

This essentially teaches us that the death of an ordinary Christian can be a death of love without transport of ecstatic love. Death of a saint consists of sufferings as for any ordinary person. However, as demonstrated by Therese, dying in pain can be the most beautiful death of love as in Jesus Christ's own agony on the Cross.

⁷ Guy Gaucher, *John and Therese: Flames of Love*, 26.

⁸ St. John of the Cross wrote, "The death of such persons is very gentle and very sweet, sweeter and more gentle than was their whole spiritual life on earth. For they die with the most sublime impulses and delightful encounters of love, resembling the swan whose song is much sweeter at the moment of death." See St. John of the Cross, *Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, Stanza 1, Commentary No. 30, 653-654. Also see LC with Cousin M. Guerin, Introductory Remarks, 245.

⁹ LC Jul 4 1897, 73.

1.3 Suffering is not solely for personal purification but for other souls.

The death of love in suffering is also Therese's desire to become an example for other 'little souls'.¹⁰ Although she lived out the essence of St. John's teaching in her daily life, Therese seldom wrote directly on the process of purifications, as elaborated by St. John of the Cross in the active nights of the senses and passive nights of the spirit. We should note that the historical contexts of their writings are different. As Gaucher indicates, St. John, under the flourishing age of the Spanish Christianity in the 16th Century, addressed to people who wanted to seriously engage in the search for God, especially to his Carmelite sisters and religious in the holy order while Therese, initially out of obedience to her Prioress Mother and blood sisters, meant to leave the story of her life for the great mass of little souls, the poor and sinners.¹¹ In her little way, Therese knew that her mission was to encourage the little souls through genuine suffering rather than mystical experiences. She said, "I shall have to say that 'joy and transports' are at the bottom of my heart. But it wouldn't be so encouraging to souls if they didn't believe I suffered very much".¹² In fact, Therese herself had experienced various occasions of transport of love.¹³ However, Therese was consciously playing down

¹⁰ On July 15, Mother Agnes consoled Therese that she might die the next day after receiving the Holy Communion on the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Therese replied, "Oh, that wouldn't resemble my little way. Would you want me to leave this little way, then in order to die? Dying after receiving Holy Communion would be too beautiful for me; little souls couldn't imitate this." See LC Jul 15 1897, 98.

¹¹ Guy Gaucher, *John and Therese: Flames of Love*, 147-148.

¹² LC Aug 15 1897, 148.

¹³ Notably, Therese recalled to her Mother Agnes one instant dart of love that she felt on the day of making her Act of Oblation. She said, "I was beginning the Way of the Cross; suddenly, I was seized with such a violent love for God that I can't explain it except by saying it felt as though I were totally plunged into fire..... I felt that one minute more, one second more, and I wouldn't be able to sustain this ardor without dying. I understood, then, what the saints were saying about these states which they experienced so often. As for me, I experienced it only once and for one single instant, falling back immediately into my habitual state of dryness." See LC Jul 7, 1897, 77. Other examples include the

the mystical flavor of joy and transports in her encounter with God especially in suffering. This would make her testimony more real and accessible to all other little souls. Therese's mission can only be understood in the light of her sufferings. In this respect, Gaucher sees Therese's way in harmony with the Second Vatican Council's universal call of all the baptized to holiness.¹⁴

2. Love and Justice of God

Therese had transformed the spirituality of reparation, as prevailing in the spiritual traditions of her time, into a sacrificial victim of love in God's mercy. Therese showed us that the core Christian meaning of martyrdom is not focused on suffering but on totally committed love with the sole aim of pleasing God.¹⁵ As Russell points out, when Therese used the terms of victim and holocaust in her Act of Oblation to describe her surrender to God's will, she was speaking the familiar language of the popular way of spirituality at her time but giving it a new meaning by addressing her suffering to a merciful and loving God.¹⁶

To Therese, God's justice is manifested and comprehensible through love.¹⁷ She is not fear of God's justice as many do.¹⁸ Therese's view of God's love

day receiving her second communion when she recalled, "My tears flowed again with an ineffable sweetness, and I repeated to myself these words of St. Paul: 'It is no longer I that live, it is Jesus who lives in me'." See SS 79. Also, one Sunday in the garden, Therese ran into inexpressible tears and her heart was overflowing with love and gratitude to God's tenderness when seeing a little white hen protecting her little chicks in the garden. See LC Jun 7 1897, 60.

¹⁴ Guy Gaucher, *John and Therese: Flames of Love*, 148.

¹⁵ Mary Frohlich, *St. Therese of Lisieux: Essential Writings*, 24.

¹⁶ Kenneth C. Russell, "St. Therese of Lisieux on Suffering" *Spiritual Life* 46: 236.

¹⁷ Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit: Therese of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity*, 262.

¹⁸ Therese wrote to her spiritual brother, Roulland, "the Lord is infinitely just; and it is this justice which

and justice helps alleviate the fear of suffering as purely the punishment or wrath of God. With the “elevator of love” as Therese envisioned, Christians do not have to climb the rough “stairway of fear” any more.¹⁹ In this metaphor, Valabek points out that Therese, apart from acknowledging God is Love, further saw that the nature of God’s love is to bend down for the sake of human. Jesus is a true lover who is thirsty for our love and loves us to folly.²⁰ Hence, Therese’s offering to the Merciful Love shows us that God does not take pleasure in human suffering but is mercifully giving His love and asking for love to be reciprocal. Just a few days before her death, when someone said that it was frightful what Therese was suffering, Therese replied, “No, it isn’t frightful. A little victim of love cannot find frightful what her Spouse sends her through love”.²¹ Love explains what suffering means and how we experience the divine attributes and loving presence of God. In suffering, God is giving us more than demanding us more.

3. Way of Love versus Justification by Works

Therese boasted neither of her works of charity nor the act of suffering itself. Rather, Therese longed for being hidden and was always cautious of spiritual pride and vanity.²² Von Balthasar comments that Therese preached a lesson straight from Apostle Paul’s writings as in Roman 4:4-5 and 3:24. Without

frightens so many souls that is the object of my joy and confidence. To be just is not only to exercise severity in order to punish the guilty; it is also to recognize right intentions and to reward virtue. I expect as much from God’s justice as from His mercy.” LT 226 May 9 1897, 1093.

¹⁹ See LT 258 Jul 18 1897, 1152.

²⁰ Redemptus Valabek, “Therese’s Approach to Gospel Living” in *Experiencing St. Therese Today*, ed. John Sullivan (Washington:ICS, 1990), 66.

²¹ LC Sep 25 1897, 200.

²² Therese wrote, “Jesus hidden also in this poor little heart was pleased to show it that everything is vanity and affliction of spirit under the sun..... I recognized from EXPERIENCE that happiness consists in hiding oneself, in remaining ignorant of created things. I understood that without love all works are nothing, even the most dazzling, such as raising the dead to life and converting peoples”. See SS 175.

the counting of works, those stripped of justice will, by God's grace, be clothed in his justice.²³ Von Balthasar even draws a remote parallel between Martin Luther and Therese, considering both their emphasis on the personal certainty of salvation, trusting faith as opposed to ascetic practices and other good works, and the preference for the New Testament mercy as against the Old Testament justice. Von Balthasar sees that the Little Way can be regarded as the Catholic answer to the demands and questions raised by Luther.²⁴

In her notion of keeping an "empty hand", Therese brought out the primacy of the little way of love over the justification by works.²⁵ Therese reminded us that we should keep seeking only Love and ask God to fill our empty hands without any merit of our own. Interestingly, in keeping our "empty hand", Therese was confident that "when God stretches out His *hand* to ask, His hand is never empty, and His intimate friends can draw from Him the courage and strength they need."²⁶

Therese also emphasized to suffer "feebly" rather than courageously.²⁷ Jesus wills us to resemble him as he also fell on the road to Calvary.²⁸ At the

²³ Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit : Therese of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity*, 259. It was stated in Romans 4:4-5, "Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness" and in Romans 3:24 "Being justified freely by His grace thorough the redemption that is in Christ Jesus".

²⁴ Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit : Therese of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity*, 96-97.

²⁵ Therese wrote in her Act of Oblation, "In the evening of this life, I shall appear before You with empty hands, for I do not You, Lord, to count my works. All our justice is stained in Your eyes, I wish, then, to be clothed in Your own *Justice* and to receive from Your *Love* the eternal possession of Yourself." See SS 277.

²⁶ SS 110.

²⁷ Therese wrote to her sister, Celine, "What an unspeakable joy to carry our Crosses FEEBLY.....The grain of sand wants to get to work, without *joy*, without *courage*, without *strength*.....it wants to work through love". See GC I LT 82 Feb 28 1889, 537.

²⁸ Therese wrote to Celine, "Jesus is there with His Cross. Privileged one of His love, He wills to make

same time, Therese was well aware of the loving protection of Christ. She wrote, "Jesus is offering us a chalice as bitter as our feeble nature can bear.... Let us not withdraw our lips from this chalice prepared by the hand of Jesus".²⁹ Besides, one's choosing the cross may still mean wanting to replace God's will with own desire and it can be a dangerous glory.³⁰ Hence, spiritual pride in asking and bearing suffering for or on one's own sake is what Christians need to avoid.

4. *Dialectic of Love and Suffering*

In Therese, we find a dialect of suffering and love that sheds light to those who are struggling in suffering and striving for strength and peace from God. According to Therese's experience, suffering begets love and love contains suffering.³¹ Love and suffering grows together as a providential act of God.³² Therese showed us that she found union with Jesus in suffering. She wrote to Celine, "the little grain of sand is united in suffering to the little shadow of Jesus".³³ With this understanding, she can then declare, "I found the secret of suffering in peace.... The one who says peace is not saying joy or at least, felt joy.... To suffer in peace it is enough to will all that Jesus wills...."³⁴ Of course, we cannot lightly say that Christians will certainly find joy and peace in

you like Him! Why be frightened at not being able to carry this Cross without weakening? Jesus on the road to Calvary fell three times...." See LT 81 Jan 23-25 1889, 529.

²⁹ LT 87 Apr 4 1889, 553.

³⁰ Jean Guilton, *The Spiritual Genius of Saint Therese of Lisieux*, trans. Felicity Leng (Liguori Missouri:Liguori/Triumph, 1997), 34.

³¹ Conrad De Meester, *The Power of Confidence: Genesis and Structure of the Way of Spiritual Childhood of St. Therese of Lisieux*, 100.

³² Therese wrote to Celine, "Each new suffering, each new agony of her heart is like a light breeze which will carry to Jesus the perfume of His lily; then He will smile lovingly, and He will immediately prepare a new sorrow. He is filling the chalice to the brim, thinking that the more His lily grows in love the more, too, must it grow in suffering.. What a privilege Jesus grants us in sending such as great sorrow." See LT 83 Mar 5 1889, 541.

³³ LT 86 Mar 15 1889, 552.

³⁴ LT 87 Apr 4 1889, 553.

suffering. The secret of suffering in peace is purely derived from love and as Therese described, this peace is not ordinary feeling of joy or even felt joy.

In this dialectic of love and suffering, Therese also showed us that there is always a gap between the ideal of love and perfection and her existing state of imperfections. In daily suffering, Therese vividly felt herself short of ideal which, however, convinced herself of God's privilege love to her.³⁵ Hence, we must learn to love our imperfections and not get frustrated in relapsing into the same faults and miseries. As Jamart indicates, when one is more advanced to perfection, one is further away from its end.³⁶ Therese demonstrated how she accepted her littleness and suffering to co-operate with God's merciful actions. Frohlich indicates that in Therese, a fundamental truth about human soul was displayed that while one could only find rest in God as a simple and single-hearted creature, this path to this simplicity is a complex one that goes through many conflicting desires, narcissism and sins.³⁷ As we have seen, Therese's intense desires for greatness had come to peace only when she was graced with the discovery of the true vocation of love. Nevertheless, we must note that we shall never be able to love God as He loves us and hence in her spirituality, Therese acknowledged that she could never fully grasp the "Abyss of Love".³⁸ Sanctity remains an ongoing journey of seeking Love and experiencing love and suffering.

³⁵ Conrad De Meester, *The Power of Confidence: Genesis and Structure of the Way of Spiritual Childhood of St. Therese of Lisieux*, 102.

³⁶ Francois Jamart, *Complete Spiritual Doctrine of St. Therese of Lisieux*, 42.

³⁷ Mary Frohlich, *St. Therese of Lisieux: Essential Writings*, 14-15.

³⁸ Therese wrote, "O my God, I have never desired anything but to love You, and I am ambitious for no other glory. Your Love has gone before me, and it has grown with me, and now it is an abyss whose depths I cannot fathom. Love attracts love...it would like to fill the abyss which attracts it, but alas! It is not even like a drop of dew lost in the ocean!" See SS 256.

5. Seeking and Witnessing Truth through Suffering

Therese set us an example as an honest seeker after truth and she knew that truth must be realized in action.³⁹ She had vividly found the truth by suffering it and witnessing it. Four days before her death, she said,

“O Mother, it’s very easy to write beautiful things about suffering, but writing is nothing, nothing! One must suffer in order to know!..... I really feel now that what I’ve said and written is true about everything..... It’s true that I wanted to suffer much for God’s sake, and it’s true that I still desire this.”⁴⁰

On her last day, Therese still held fast to the search for the truth as she wrote, “Yes it seems to me I never sought anything but the truth”.⁴¹ Here, Therese taught us that one must seek and suffer if one is to know the mystery of what all these desires and acts of suffering are worth.

Therese stressed that truth was her only nourishment, not visions or mystical ecstasies.⁴² Therese’s teaching, though not organized systematically, arises out of her deep reflection rather than some fascination of private revelation. De Meester comments that Therese possessed a critical and realistic mind that requires serious foundation before accepting anything

³⁹ Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit : Therese of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity*, 44.

⁴⁰ LC Sep 25 1897, 200.

⁴¹ LC Sep 30 1897, 205.

⁴² When Sister Marie of the Sacred Heart told her that when she died the angels would come to her in the company of Our Lord and that she would see them with light and beauty, Therese replied, “All these images do me no good; I can nourish myself on nothing but the truth. This is why I’ve never wanted any visions. We can’t see, here on earth, heaven, the angels, etc., just as they are. I prefer to wait until after my death”. See LC Aug 5 1897, 134.

supernatural. Like many others in face of suffering, metaphysical questions arose in her mind and the words 'seek', 'find' and 'understand' flowed easily in her writings.⁴³ Desire for the truth also increases one's self-knowledge. Like Therese, she knew very well the inner depth of her being and she did not tolerate any overstatement even for pious people to hear.⁴⁴ She lived out everything before she wrote and testified. Von Balthasar regards Therese's life as an exemplary way of the mystery of contemplation as action. Her prayers, suffering and silence are all woven around her apostolic mission.⁴⁵

In her last 18-month trial of faith, it is noteworthy that Therese vividly experienced the thoughts of the unbelievers, atheists and materialists at her time.⁴⁶ In the midst of these torments of faith, Therese still willed to offer her pain to obtain the light of faith for the non-believers. Today Christians, regardless of the level of spiritual maturity, would be caught into similar kind of spiritual trials. Therese showed us that it was something that cannot be avoided and these experiences could do us good by letting us feel how and why non-believers reject Christian faith. This helps us understand their rationale and concerns based on which we can take more appropriate approach to share the Gospel as well as serving them. This also helps us feel what Jesus feels being rejected, misunderstood and humiliated by the

⁴³ These words of 'seek', 'find' and 'understand' were used 46, 137 and 144 times respectively in her autobiography. See Conrad De Meester, *With Empty Hands – The Message of St. Therese of Lisieux*, 34-35.

⁴⁴ Jean Guitton, *The Spiritual Genius of Saint Therese of Lisieux*, 29-30.

⁴⁵ Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit : Therese of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity*, 190-191.

⁴⁶ See SS 211. Also Therese said, "It's the reasoning of the worst materialists which is imposed upon my mind; Later, unceasingly making new advances, science will explain everything naturally; we shall have the absolute reason for everything that exists and that still remain a problem, because there remain very many things to be discovered, etc. etc. O little Mother, must one have thoughts like this when one loves God so much! Finally, I offer up these very great pains to obtain the light of faith for poor unbelievers, for all those who separate themselves from the Church's beliefs." LC Aug 1897, 257.

souls he loves. Of course, extreme situations as what Therese experienced could become dangerous threats to our faith. Therese showed us that in her littleness and with her unwavering trust on God, she accepted this trial as willed by Christ and a privilege of love to participate in the redemptive work of Christ. She was deigned by Christ to sit at the table of the sinners and eat their bread of sorrows.

II. LIMITATIONS AND CHALLENGES

While Therese's theological understanding and practices of suffering are consistently grounded in the unity with love, one may still question its practicality and applicability under modern contexts. Afterall, Therese spoke and lived as a Catholic nun in the 19th Century France. For instance, the notion of self-sacrifice, belittling and obedience may appear out of fashion nowadays. I would discuss some possible limitations and challenges posed on Therese's spirituality and assess how they stand.

1. Notion of Masochism and Self-Sacrifice

One may see that Therese's love of suffering could easily incorporate a masochistic sentimentality. From feminist perspective, some Christian teachings of woman's self-denial and sacrifice as a valued virtue are seen as restricting women's spiritual maturity rather than promoting equality and

mutuality of relationship.⁴⁷ The underlying notion of the attraction and joy of suffering also gives doubt as to whether people are devoting to the love of God or they are just denying God or themselves under the self-imposed or forced disguise of sacrifice and suffering.

From a psychoanalyst look at Therese, Ann Belford Ulanov, has mapped out the various differences between the sentiment of masochism and the religious devotion in Therese.⁴⁸ Rather than promoting masochism, in Ulanov's view, Therese focused on the exchanges of love. She helped us explore the images of littleness and showed us that daily suffering helps remove everything that hinders the exchanges of love.⁴⁹ De Meester also sees Therese not a masochist as it is not suffering in itself or for itself that becomes the object of joy for Therese. If she loves this suffering and finds in it her joy, it is because she accepts it as the existential situation in which she seeks and loves Jesus, the true object of her joy.⁵⁰ In assessing the maturity in the relationship with God and other fellows, Joann Wolski Conn sees that

⁴⁷ Joann Wolski Conn, "A Feminist View of Therese" in *Experiencing St. Therese Today*, ed. John Sullivan (Washington:ICS, 1990), 121-123.

⁴⁸ Ulanov compared masochistic sentimentality with religious devotion in Therese. The key differences include: (1) Masochism displays self-abasement, inferiority and appeasing while Therese did not feel low self-esteem, but loved and loveable. (2) Masochism involves dependency with fear of abandonment. Therese certainly feels dependent on God but she wants to grow and strives to come closer to the center. (3) Masochists sacrifice and may manipulate others to make them feel guilty. For Therese, the contrast is in her give-and-take. She wanted all she could get in order to offer all to God she loved. Unlike the masochist who refuses to develop the ego, Therese sacrifices in order to gain the self in God. (4) The masochist sees pain as an end in itself preoccupying with most minute details of pain. For religious devotion, pain is a by-product of the loving union and pain is not sought. Therese simply told us to accept it. (5) For masochists, they are compelled to keep looking for what is the missing part in them and are not free because they keep substituting rituals by rituals. For Therese, relation to suffering is a willing one out of love. (6) Masochistic experience produces suffering, in ourselves and people round us. For Therese, in suffering she always points to the center and feels loved and grateful. Love is poured out lavishly. Unlike the masochist who aims to remain safe by getting ride of oneself, the religious impulse leads us to give all of ourselves in union with the other as in the eucharistic prayer. See Ann Belford Ulanov, "Religious Devotion or Masochism? A Psychoanalyst Look at Therese" in *Experiencing St. Therese Today*, ed. John Sullivan (Washington:ICS, 1990), 148-155.

⁴⁹ Ann Belford Ulanov, "Religious Devotion or Masochism? A Psychoanalyst Look at Therese" in *Experiencing St. Therese Today*, 155.

⁵⁰ Conrad De Meester, *The Power of Confidence: Genesis and Structure of the Way of Spiritual Childhood of St. Therese of Lisieux*, 325.

Therese was far from being the stage of childhood dependency but the matured loving relationship that Therese had lived out manifests freedom, mutuality and equality. The experience of genuine mutuality has strengthened her self-worth and deepened her desires to make more connections with others.⁵¹ Despite these scholars' positive assessments, the apparent sentimentality and notion of sacrificial suffering as exhibited in Therese's life experience can easily be misguided as sugary, self-afflicted or exaggerated piety. It demands our caution to examine her inner experiences and spiritual teachings in greater depth and breath, rather than picking up just one or two of her images of littleness or daily acts of charity.

2. *Limited Scope of Social Concerns*

Living in a closed circle with limited exposure to the social and political situations of the outside world, Therese's concerns of suffering mainly surrounded her self, family and the convent. For instance, as Conn indicates, social awareness of the oppression caused by the patriarchal church aligned with the French monarchists or expression of concern for the suffering of the Vietnamese under French colonialism was lacking in Therese.⁵² From a feminist theological perspective, these critiques have their own validity. However, as Bro points out, Therese was not totally insensitive to the social problems of her time. Bro suggests four incidents that Therese had indeed shown a passionate interest on the contemporary questions for which she

⁵¹ Joann Wolski Conn, "A Feminist View of Therese" in *Experiencing St. Therese Today*, 139 and "Therese of Lisieux: Far from Spiritual Childhood" *Spiritius* 6, No. 1 (Spring 2006): 85.

⁵² Joann Wolski Conn, "A Feminist View of Therese" in *Experiencing St. Therese Today*, 139.

was dedicated to pray for and offer her life.⁵³ Nevertheless, from these four incidents, we can still find that Therese was primarily concerned only with the conversion of sinners, unbelievers and for the apostate priests. For issues like social justice and liberation from patriarchal oppression, Therese had indeed not displayed any explicit concerns or awareness.

One may also find that there is a certain narcissistic dramatization of minute wounds in Therese that she identified as treasure of desires.⁵⁴ To speak of a danger, Von Balthasar indicates there is a certain danger that Therese measures God's love only in terms of the love granted to her personally.⁵⁵ Since Therese tested and judged things from what she personally experienced, this might narrow the breath and depth of the divine truth that are being revealed and comprehended. Of course, Therese always stayed close to Jesus and the Scriptures. This has undoubtedly made her loving encounter with Jesus a genuine one, despite its limitation and subjectivity.

⁵³ Bernard Bro illustrated four incidents: (1) Therese and Pranzini, a murderer and non-believer who was seen as holding and kissing the crucifix at the moment of his execution. Therese regarded Pranzini as her 'first child' and her prayer being answered. See SS 100. (2) Therese and Father Hyacinthe Loyson, who was a former Carmelite friar and later married and found a church. Therese kept praying for him for his conversion and offered her last Communion on August 19 to Father Hyacinthe. See LC Aug 20, 1897, 157. (3) Therese and Henry Cherow, who was a mayor and a famous anticlerical leader. Therese prayed and offered her life for his salvation. (4) Therese and Leo Taxil, who was the author of anticlerical pamphlets and had fooled the Catholic circle through the inventing of a false conversion of a Diana Vaughan. Therese had written to this fake Diana and wrote a play on her conversion. Therese felt deeply humiliated by the act of Leo Taxil who later unmasked himself on Apr 19, 1897. See Bernard Bro, *St. Therese of Lisieux: Her Family, Her Goal, Her Message*, trans. Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 135-136.

⁵⁴ Mary Frohlich, *St. Therese of Lisieux: Essential Writings*, 29-30. Frohlich refers to an example incident in the Carmel laundry. Therese recalled a sister throwing dirty water into her face every time she lifted the handkerchiefs in the laundry. However, Therese responded, "But I immediately thought I would be very foolish to refuse these treasures which were being given to me so generously, and I took care not to show my struggle. I put forth all my efforts to desire receiving very much of this dirty water..." See SS 250.

⁵⁵ Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit: Therese of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity*, 96. Von Balthasar refers to an example of Therese's writing, "O my Jesus, it is perhaps an illusion but it seems to me that you cannot fill a soul with more love than the loved with which You have filled mine; it is for this reason that I dare to ask You to loved those whom you have given me with the love with which you loved me". See SS 256.

3. *How to discern the nature of suffering?*

Therese spoke of suffering as united with love given by God. However, how can one affirm whether the vivid experience of sufferings are the gifts of grace or merely results of human's own desires and even the tricks of the devils? In some occasions, Therese herself had spoken of the work of the devils in her suffering.⁵⁶ Overall in her collected works, Therese did not spell out precisely how one can discern the nature of suffering. For her 18-month trial of the faith, Therese had also not specified too many details about the trials. Perhaps, it is because she found the trial so profound that is incomprehensible or she is afraid of blaspheme or having said too much.⁵⁷ Therese always tended to keep the depth of her feeling in herself and as such, the readers are not able to grasp precisely how and when we should discern the nature of suffering.

4. *Less Reference to the Trinity*

Overall, the reference to the Trinity especially the operation of the Holy Spirit in Therese's writings is less frequent. While her Act of Oblation was drawn up on the feast of the Most Holy Trinity in 1895 and accordingly was addressed to the Most Blessed Trinity,⁵⁸ mainly two aspects of the Trinity are

⁵⁶ We recall that Therese regarded her childhood mysterious illness as the "work of the devil". See SS 62. At her deathbed, Therese also talked about the attack of the devils. She begged her sisters and to have others to pray for her and said, "Oh! How necessary it is to pray for the dying! If you only knew! I believe the demon has asked God permission to tempt me with an extreme suffering, to make me fail in patience and faith". See LC Aug 25 1897, 168. Describing her trial of faith, Therese also wrote, "If you only knew what frightful thoughts obsess me! Pray very much for me in order that I do not listen to the devil who wants to persuade me about so many lies. It's the reasoning of the worst materialists which is imposed upon my mind..." See LC Aug 1897, 257.

⁵⁷ Therese wrote, "Mother... I don't want to write any longer about it; I fear I might blaspheme, I fear even that I have already said too much". See SS 213.

⁵⁸ SS 276.

concretely manifest in her teaching, i.e. the Incarnate Son and the Father.⁵⁹ Von Balthasar suggests that the fact that Therese did not see farther into reflection in the economy of salvation is characteristics of her existential theology. Therese's teaching is too narrowly conditioned by her own life and she has to demonstrate it all in her own person. Hence, her life cannot demonstrate an objective doctrine as that of the Trinity.⁶⁰ Indeed as we can see, Therese's spirituality was typically focused on the Incarnate Christ. She was fascinated by Jesus' whole earthly existence from his birth to his passion. To Therese, God is Jesus and she does not seem overly concerned with the distinction of persons in the Blessed Trinity.⁶¹ Therese's doctrine is confined to her little way, i.e. simply to know about love, how to love and to be loved.⁶²

III. SUFFERING : FURTHER AREAS TO ADDRESS

With her little way, Therese suffered as many ordinary people do. Her interpretation and experience of suffering as united with love offers an important perspective of faith and peace to those who are suffering without seeing or hearing God, questioning about their faith, or are struggling with the tension between God's mercy and justice. To Therese, the mystery of suffering is understood only in relation to love based on which her zealous

⁵⁹ Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit : Therese of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity*, 299-300.

⁶⁰ Von Balthasar illustrates that even for her visions, infrequent though they are, all refer specifically to herself, such as the devil who flees before her and the Mother Mary smiles at her and approaches her with the whole vision directly related to her cure. Thus her teaching cannot be explicitly Trinitarian. See Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit: Therese of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity*, 300-301.

⁶¹ Redemptus Valabek, "Therese's Approach to Gospel Living" in *Experiencing St. Therese Today*, 64.

⁶² Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit : Therese of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity*, 301.

desires for apostolic mission and sanctification as a martyr and saint had been nurtured and realized.

There are limitations and challenges in Therese' interpretation of suffering too, especially from modern feminist theological perspectives. The notion of self-sacrifice and suffering servant would need to be carefully addressed in alignment with the promotion of equality and mutuality against the patriarchal culture of domination. Apart from a personal spiritual dimension of suffering, the theological understanding of the meaning of suffering should take into a broader consideration of a social or communal perspective. The apostolic essence of suffering would also need to be expanded to address not only the spiritual salvation of souls but the issues of social justice and freedom on earth, and the sharing of love to neighbors, believers or not, across all boundaries. It would also benefit the readers if the issue of spiritual discernment is more fully addressed. In the next Chapter, I would conclude and summarize the results of the study.

CONCLUSION

I. THEOLOGICAL MEANING AND PRACTICE OF SUFFERING: AN INTERPRETATION

Suffering : Not a Means but the Process and End

In Therese's spirituality, the theological meaning of suffering is grounded in its unity with love. Suffering is an integral part of love, given as a grace and privilege of love by God. They are inseparable because suffering is also an expression of divine love of Christ to love and save all souls. This is vividly manifested in the sorrowful Holy Face and the humiliation of the Suffering Servant. Suffering begets love and love consists of suffering. However, suffering has no salvific value by itself. As love consists of suffering, it is essentially the love for, through and in Christ that can draw non-believers and sinners to Jesus Christ. Hence, in light of its unity with love, suffering itself is not only to be seen in a functional way as a means to achieve sanctity or redemptive goals. It represents the whole process and end to experience the loving presence of God. However, this becomes true only when one is willing to accept his/her littleness and open himself/herself with empty hands to seek the wills of God, not their own. Only this way, suffering brings a profound peace. As in Therese, this peace, however, cannot always be fully expressible or comprehensible and it is not even the kind of felt joy as human normally experiences. One has to go through suffering himself/herself to

experience this profound peace in the merciful love of God. As Bro points out, to Therese, the secret of happiness is to assent to loving the kind of life which God is offering us to the last and the real difficulty is not the cross itself but the disarming of ourselves to God.¹

Suffering : Reciprocity of Love with Jesus and Others

To Christ's followers, suffering becomes part of love to be reciprocated to Jesus and offered to others. Jesus, portrayed by Therese as the folly and beggar of love, desires to be loved and to consume souls who offer themselves to His love.² Hence, suffering embraces the zeal for apostolic mission and sanctification to be a saint and martyr. However, it is fundamentally vital that love is only the driving force, purpose and way for any sanctifying and redemptive actions. As seen in Therese's spirituality and acts of suffering, the sole purpose of her life is to please Jesus and make him loved on earth and heaven. It is also Christ who suffers for and in us that enable us to suffer and love others in participation of Christ's redemptive acts for the union of the Mystical Body.

Practice of Suffering : Suffer Feebly

In Therese's Little Way of Spiritual Childhood, the greatness in sanctity is to suffer feebly rather than courageously, in hiddenness, darkness and silence. The advance to sanctity is to become smaller and smaller to receive the

¹ Bernard Bro, *The Little Way: The Spirituality of Therese of Lisieux*, 109.

² Therese wrote, "In order that Love be fully satisfied, it is necessary that It lowers Itself, and that It lowers Itself to nothingness and transform this nothingness into fire. O Jesus, I know it, love is repaid by love alone." See SS 195.

merciful love of Christ. Two months before her death, when being told by her sisters that she was a saint, Therese replied, “No, I’m not a *saint*; I’ve never performed the actions of a saint. I’m a very little soul upon whom God has bestowed graces; that’s what I am. What I say is the truth; you’ll see this in heaven.”³ As we have seen, Therese was ultimately not seeking to be a ‘saint’ but only the ‘truth’. Von Balthasar vividly points out that in Therese, ‘progress’ means going backward from great sanctity to little sanctity. For Therese, the primary motive is not sanctity itself but love of God, glory of the Church, salvation of souls and fulfillment of the divine will as expressed in her Act of Oblation.⁴ Hence, in Therese’s spirituality, paradoxically, to arrive at “great” sanctity requires a “great” desire but to realize this “greatness”, one must move from being a “great” to “little” soul. Similarly, for suffering, Therese always desires martyrdom like Joan of Arc and other great saints and her responses during the darkest days of suffering had displayed the combative elements of a warrior. However, rather than stressing on her staunching courage, she willed to die of love as a feeble victim without any glorifying martyrdom, mystical graces and extraordinary penances.

Practice of Suffering : Choose ‘All’

In Therese’s little way, she boldly chose “ALL” which embodies every aspect of her life committed to loving and being loved by Christ, including daily acts of suffering. The reciprocity of giving and receiving “ALL” not only makes her fearless of suffering, but accepting suffering with loving obedience. The

³ LC Aug 9 1897, 143.

⁴ Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit : Therese of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity*, 110-111.

simple and absolute trust to the Merciful Love is continuously burnt by the assurance of the mutuality of love between the Father and the child. Like the Holy Face, Therese willed to remain hidden, humiliated and obedient as a little grain of sand. Like the Child Jesus, Therese willed to remain as a little child sleeping and always running to the arms of the Father. Despite intense darkness of suffering, Therese willed to believe that the Father would bend down to lift her up to the 'elevator of love'. Under the "choosing ALL" childlike spirit, Therese was totally offering herself to Jesus and even if she had 'nothing' to offer, she wittingly said that she would just offer that 'nothing' to Him. To suffer and to love as a child is mysteriously associated in Therese's spirituality.⁵

Practice of Suffering : Inevitable but Not a Deliberate Choice

Practically, suffering is inevitable in human life. If love exists, suffering exists as an essential part of love. However, suffering should not become a deliberate choice for our own sake. We do not merely seek or accept suffering as if something heroic or passive to shoulder. This might easily fall into spiritual pride or self-centered narcissism and masochism. Therese always reminded us that it is God who wills us to desire what He wants us to desire. As Therese said, if she sought suffering out of and for her own will, she would be too little and weak to cope with suffering by herself. As a human, Therese did experience suffering with tears, frustrations and

⁵ The intertwined relationship among love, suffering and childhood can be discerned in one of her letters that Therese wrote to her spiritual brother, Belliere. Therese wrote, "you must begin to realize that God has always treated me like a spoiled child. It is true that His Cross has followed me from the cradle, but this Cross Jesus has made me love with a passion. He has always made me desire what He wanted to give me." See LT 253 Jul 13 1897, 1140.

temptations throughout her physical, psychosocial and spiritual sufferings. Like every ordinary person at the deathbed, she did not know when and how death was coming and every minute brought immense physical torture. It is exactly the common pains and conflicts that Therese went through that make her teaching of suffering accessible and applicable to modern lay Christians, not just for some religious and pious ones seeking for a sanctified life. Along with the little way of love, every ordinary Christian may seek the truth of suffering in its relation of love in, through and for Christ, in their daily lives.

II. LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY

This research is mainly based on Therese's own writings and scholars' studies from the Catholic theologians and spiritual writers. Due to limited time, the research has not been specifically drawn from theological perspectives of Protestant traditions, especially in the theological reflection of the Suffering God and Church in the unity of the Mystical Body of Christ. With this wider scope of reflections, the research would become much more enriched especially for readers in the Protestant churches. Also for Therese's writings, there are a number of poetries and plays which may help us gain a deeper understanding of how Therese interpreted and articulated suffering. However, due to limited time and accessibility to such resources, they are not extensively studied as the primary sources in this research.

III. SUFFERING: A MYSTERY TO BE EXPLORED AND LIVED OUT

Finally, suffering is essentially a mystery of love. Therese's own personal experiences shed us some lights of what she called "the secret of suffering" which lies in a Christ-centered way of loving solely in, through and for Christ. The preceding discussions are to argue that suffering is more than a means to sanctity and redemptive mission by human efforts and to emphasize the merciful love of God as manifested by the suffering of Jesus Christ. This does not comprehensively address all related doctrines and theological concerns on suffering. The quest for truth in suffering and love itself is still on. To Therese, she acknowledged that she could never fully grasp the "abyss of Love". She wrote,

"O my God, I have never desired anything but to love You, and I am ambitious for no other glory. Your Love has gone before me, and it has grown with me, and now it is an abyss whose depths I cannot fathom. Love attracts love, and my Jesus, my love leaps toward Yours; it would like to fill the abyss which attracts it, but alas! It is not even like a drop of dew lost in the ocean! For me to love You as You love me, I would have to borrow Your own Love, and then only would I be at rest".⁶

It is an ongoing journey to seek Love with the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit. As demonstrated in Therese's spirituality and her existential practice of suffering, we need to keep running towards Christ, accepting our

⁶ SS 256.

fragile humanity and opening ourselves to the wills of God while experiencing the loving presence of God at the present moment in our daily encounter with God and others.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

St. Therese of Lisieux. *Her Last Conversations*. Translated by John Clarke.
Washington:ICS Publications, 1977.

_____. *Letters of St. Therese of Lisieux, General Correspondence Volume I 1877-1890*. Centenary Edition. Translated by John Clarke.
Washington:ICS Publications, 1982.

_____. *Letters of St. Therese of Lisieux, General Correspondence Volume II 1890-1897*. Centenary Edition. Translated by John Clarke.
Washington:ICS Publications, 1988.

_____. *Story of A Soul : The Autobiography of Saint Therese of Lisieux*. 3rd Edition. Translated by John Clarke. Washington:ICS Publications, 1996.

_____. *The Prayers of St. Therese of Lisieux*. Translated by Aletheia Kane.
Washington:ICS Publications, 1997.

Secondary Sources

Bro, Bernard. *The Little Way: The Spirituality of Therese of Lisieux*.
Translated by Alan Neame. London:Darton, Longman and Todd, 1997.

_____. *Saint Therese of Lisieux: Her Family, Her God, Her message*.
Translated by Anne Englund Nash. San Francisco:Ignatius Press, 2003.

Conn, Joan Wolski. "A Feminist View of Therese" in *Experiencing Saint*

Therese Today. Edited by John Sullivan. 119-139. Washington:ICS, 1990.

_____. "Therese of Lisieux: Far From Spiritual Childhood" *Spiritius* 6 No. 1 (Spring 2006): 68-90.

De Meester, Conrad. *The Power of Confidence: Genesis and Structure of the 'Way of Spiritual Childhood' of St. Therese of Lisieux*. Translated by Susan Conroy. New York:Alba House, 1998.

_____. *With Empty Hands : The Message of St. Therese of Lisieux*. Translated by Mary Seymour. Washington:ICS, 2002.

Frohlich, Mary. *St. Therese of Lisieux: Essential Writings*. Selected with an Introduction by Mary Frohlich. Maryknoll NY:Orbis Books, 2003.

Gaucher, Guy. *John and Therese: Flames of Love – The influence of St. John of the Cross in the Life and Writings of St. Therese of Lisieux*. Translated by Alexandra Plettenberg-Serban. New York:Alba House, 1999.

_____. *The Passion of Therese of Lisieux*. Translated by Anne M. Brennan. New York:Crossroad, 1990.

_____. "Preface" in *St. Therese: Doctor of the Little Way*. Edited by Francis Mary. ix-xi. New Bedford, MA:Franciscan Friars of the Immaculate, 1997.

Glueckert, Leopold. "The World of Therese: France, Church and State in the Late Nineteenth Century" in *Experiencing Saint Therese Today*. Edited by John Sullivan. 10-27. Washington:ICS, 1990.

Guillon, Jean. *The Spiritual Genius of Saint Therese of Lisieux*. Translated by Felicity Leng. Liguori Missouri:Liguori/Triumph, 1997.

Jamart, Francois. *Complete Spiritual Doctrine of St. Therese of Lisieux*.
Translated by Walter Van De Putte. Manila:St. Paul, 1989.

John Paul II. "Pope Paul II Declares – St. Therese, Doctor of the Church" in *St. Therese: Doctor of the Little Way*. Edited by Francis Mary. 66-71.
New Bedford, MA:Franciscan Friars of the Immaculate, 1997.

Johnson, Vernon. *Spiritual Childhood – The Spirituality of St. Therese of Lisieux*. Third Edition. San Francisco:Ignatius Press, 2001.

McCalfrey, Eugene. "The Real Therese is Elusive" in *St. Therese: Doctor of the Little Way*. Edited by Francis Mary. 26-30. New Bedford, MA:
Franciscan Friars of the Immaculate, 1997.

McPartlan, Paul. "Introduction" in *The Little Way: The Spirituality of Therese of Lisieux*, Bernard Bro, Translated by Alan Neame. ix-x. London:Darton,
Longman and Todd, 1997.

Miller, Frederick. *The Trial of Faith of St. Therese of Lisieux*. New York:Alba
House, 1998.

Payne, Steven. *St. Therese of Lisieux: Doctor of the Universal Church*. New
York:St. Paul, 2002.

Russell, Kenneth C. "St. Therese of Lisieux on Suffering" *Spiritual Life* 46
(Winter 2000): 230-240.

Seelaus, Vilma. "Therese: Spirituality of Imperfection" *Spiritual Life* 44, No. 4
(Winter 1998): 199-212.

Six, Jean-Francois. *Light of the Night: The Last Eighteen Months in the Life of Therese of Lisieux*. Translated by John Bowden. London:SCM Press,
1996.

CUHK Libraries



004660217